

MOBILIZING A FRONTIER:  
DIEN BIEN PHU AND THE MAKING OF VIETNAM, 1945-1955

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This dissertation offers a historical sociology of the making and unmaking of rule in a frontier borderland in Vietnam. By thinking through the social processes accompanying the spatial expansion and configuration of state power, I argue that military conquest was a necessary but insufficient step towards an emergent nation-state's lasting consolidation of territorial claims. Legitimizing state claims to territory rested on mutually constitutive and spatialized processes of institutionalizing relations of rule; agrarian development and reciprocal exchange; constructing communities of nation and ethnicity; and social mobilization during, and for purposes of, warfare.

Because the first Indochina war ended dramatically in Dien Bien Phu, the past of what is now a national frontier is remembered and forgotten in particular ways. In Vietnam, the site is celebrated as battle and setting for victory in 1954 of revolutionary ideals over foreign oppression. What is *not* remembered in such nationalist histories has equal significance for understanding the sometimes contradictory outcomes of state making. This dissertation analyzes human beings as complex, thinking persons with wayward agendas who did not always respond as intended.

Grounded in archival research, the dissertation attends to the ways in which state claims to territory and legitimate rule are contested and how outcomes are contingent and non-linear. The narrative begins when colonial officers and map-makers encountered the *Sipsongchauthai* confederation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, recognized a ruling Thai elite, incorporated them into French Tonkin, and, in so doing,

remade the Black River borderlands into an imperial frontier. After World War II, France organized the Thai Federation, created splits among local elites, and unintentionally generated support for the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's nationalist alternative. Although cadres legitimized national rule by delegitimizing a neocolonial rival, Vietnam's emergent "Northwest" region reproduced Tonkin's borders and underlying political configuration while political elites reproduced the colonial category of "ethnicity" to regulate uncertain boundaries between community and territory, land and class. The unsteady incorporation of Black River peoples into Vietnam illustrates an evolving—and ongoing—negotiation between highlands and lowlands, center and frontier, state and society, nation and ethnicity.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Christian Cunningham Lentz graduated *summa cum laude* in 1997 from Cornell University where he studied conservation and development in Southeast Asia. After participating in a community resource management project in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia he worked for the US Department of State as an Indonesian-language interpreter. He holds a Masters in Environmental Science from Yale University's School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, completed in 2001. He earned a Master of Science in Development Sociology at Cornell University in 2004 with a thesis on cultural adaptation to environmental disturbance in Sumba, Indonesia. While pursuing a PhD in Development Sociology at Cornell University and assisted by two Foreign Language and Area Studies awards, his interests expanded geographically and topically. In 2006-2007, he was a Fulbright Scholar in Vietnam where he undertook fieldwork in Dien Bien Phu and archival research in Hanoi for his dissertation project. His paper on social mobilization earned the Department of Development Sociology's Taietz Award in 2010 for outstanding work presented at a professional conference. He is currently a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Sociology at Duke University.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### *Encountering past in present*

I visited Mr. L for the second time on an August morning in 2006 before the rainy season clouds gathered for the customary afternoon shower.<sup>1</sup> His wooden house sat in the village of Noong Nhai 2, situated in Thanh Xương Commune south of town among the irrigated rice fields of Điện Biên District's verdant plain. When we arrived, the retired farmer and director of the Farmers' Association signaled for me to park my bike under his stilted house and beckoned us to mount the stairs and enter its living quarters. I introduced my wife and he, in turn, introduced his wife, his infant granddaughter, and his elderly parents. I explained that my wife and I were both interested in learning more about Điện Biên Phủ's local history. He sat us at a table while his wife fetched a bottle of ricewine, the contents of which he then poured repeatedly into our three cups—performing a gesture, he told us, signaling welcome and good cheer. On that day and others to come, he described events and pointed to processes significant to his home and its place in modern Vietnam.

Mr. L responded patiently to my questions about the region's local history, its complex ethno-linguistic composition, and patterns of agrarian change. Like virtually all Thái people in and around Điện Biên Phủ, he identified himself and his neighbors as Black Thái. By contrast, the White Thái people lived to the north, clustered around the old regional capital of Lai Châu. "White Thái and Black Thái are really the same, really only one," he explained, "but because of fighting became two."

Before "liberation" from French colonial rule in 1954, he said, there were very few Kinh people in the area, only those who worked with the French. "No one else

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<sup>1</sup> Conversation, bản Noong Nhai 2, xã Thanh Xương, huyện Điện Biên, 22 Aug 2006.

spoke the Kinh language,” referring to a language I had always called Vietnamese. While the soldiers who arrived in 1954 with the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign learned to speak Thái quickly, he learned the Kinh language in school, “like you learned English.” Kinh people, he continued, began to settle the area after the campaign’s end in 1954, “to clear the wilderness in the mountains.”

Many of the early migrants, some of whom brought wives and children, were veterans of the French war who, he explained, “helped” restore productivity to Điện Biên’s wartorn landscape. In 1975, after Vietnam was “reunited” between north and south, many more Kinh people, mostly from Thái Bình Province, arrived to participate in the “new economic zone” program.<sup>2</sup> “They came here,” Mr. L said, “in order to unify the country.”

Although our conversation took place in Vietnamese, I was struck that so few local people had spoken this language before 1954. What appeared as something taken-for-granted, i.e. that all Vietnamese spoke Vietnamese, turned out to be something imported by Việt/Kinh people from the Red River Delta. Moreover, Mr. L and everyone else who self-identified as Thái—or as Khu Mu, Hmong, Lao, or any other of the region’s many social groups—recognized the language not as Vietnamese but as the “Kinh language” (*tiếng Kinh*). They destabilized the so-called “national” tongue by referring to it in ethnic terms, associating linguistic facility with identity and origin. If this revealing slippage was common, then Mr. L went further by associating Kinh-ness with power. In Vietnam as everywhere else, he asserted, government power lies in the cities embedded in the culture and economy of the dominant ethnic group.

Mr. L’s narrative contained many dates and events commemorated in

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<sup>2</sup> “Clearing the wilderness” and “new economic zones” refer to two state-sponsored migration programs known in Vietnamese, respectively, as, “khai hoang” and “vùng kinh tế mới.” For more on these and other resettlements from the Red River delta to montane Vietnam, cf., Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

Vietnam—“liberation” in 1954; “reunification” in 1975— yet his emphasis departed from nationalist narratives in illuminating ways. Mr. L dwelled on the year 1954 not to evoke a glorious battle and its outcome but, rather, to tell of its devastating local consequences. In April, while trench warfare raged only a few kilometers away, he recalled how a French airplane dropped a bomb on his village, killing over 400 people, “mostly women and children.”<sup>3</sup> He was 15 years old and survived only because he happened to be upstairs in his stilted house; those who died, many of them friends or relatives, had been sitting or standing on the ground. “Everything was destroyed,” he said haltingly, “houses burned.”

A memorial now marks the site and, notably, occupies ground next to the commune office complex. The memorial features a sculpture of a woman, dressed in Thái garb, who stands erect, stares forward stoically, and bears in her arms the limp body of a child. Flanking her are murals depicting, on one side, Thái women assisting soldiers of the People’s Army and, on another, Thái women with infants on their backs, young children, and elderly folk all fleeing flames. Mr. L never mentioned this memorial. Nor did his memory of himself as a teenage boy feature in its representations, pointing to a gap between personal memory and official commemoration. State power rests, in part, on a privileged capacity to represent a national past.

Later in October when the rice crop was approaching harvest, I revisited Mr. L to ask about agricultural change and, once again, his narrative began in 1954.<sup>4</sup> “Land reform,” he stated in response, “there was none here at all—only downstream.” Instead, he explained, “The government divided land for poor people,” because, “land

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<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship questions whether the explosion was, in fact, a French aerial bomb or the detonation of a People’s Army weapons cache. Cf., Philippe Le Failler, *La Rivière Noire: L’Intégration d’une Marche Frontière au Vietnam* (draft manuscript, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Conversation, bản Noong Nhai 2, xã Thanh Xương, huyện Điện Biên, 17 Oct 2006.

was still plentiful.” Relative land abundance allowed also for settlers to clear new fields and for the army to establish state farms (*nông trường*). Between 1958-60, Mr. L and fellow farmers constructed an irrigation network that, when completed, “enabled production to be large.” The end of construction coincided with the initiation of collectivization in 1960-61. “In 1966-67,” during a second round, “I worked hard as the director of commune-scale collectivization: I had to go mobilize (*vận động*).”

In retrospect, what surprises me about my conversations with Mr. L was that we were able to have them at all. The first time we met, I was accompanied by four officials: my district minder and a junior cadre as well as two commune officials.<sup>5</sup> Such accompaniment was standard practice for village visits and, as a result, my attempts to talk with everyday folk were often mediated by a formidable battery of state personnel. Mr. L, however, seemed to enjoy a special status. After introducing us, the four officials wandered off and no longer joined our discussions. Fortunately, he had an excellent memory. Only after I consulted archival documents and news reports from the 1950s did I learn the significance of what he told me about land reform, mobilization, communitarian relations, and state power.

A few days after my wife and I visited Mr. L, a local official serving in the mountains above the plain led me to rethink what the retired Farmers’ Association leader had meant by “unity” (*đoàn kết*).

Before we left, my district minder explained that the commune of Núa Ngam differed from Thanh Xương in terms of livelihood strategies, population, and terrain. Unlike the plain commune where Kinh settlers and Black Thái tended irrigated rice, this mountain commune was populated mostly by Hmong and Lao farmers growing swidden corn and rice. Because it was the rainy season, he said, the dirt roads up to

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 18 Aug 2006.

ridgeline and mountain-top Hmong villages were inaccessible. Therefore, our visits were confined to villages proximate to the sealed road. Little did I know that weather vagaries had justified a decision to exclude Hmong villages from my field research.

To reach the commune of Núa Ngam, we left the irrigated fields behind. My minder led me on a riverside road which climbed steadily, wound past sheer cliffs, and afforded glimpses of ripening corn. We slowed down in a small cluster of shops and pulled into the commune's office complex.

A representative of the People's Committee greeted us and granted our visit approval. Shortly afterwards, Mr. D introduced himself and invited me to a small, bamboo-walled room with dirt floors.<sup>6</sup> From this modest office, he functioned as head of Núa Ngam's Fatherland Front and supervised branches of mass organizations, like the Farmers' Association and Women's Union. "In 1976, I came here from Thái Bình," he said. Here was one of the many Kinh people whose presence in Điện Biên Mr. L had traced to a state-sponsored migration program.<sup>7</sup> "Land was spacious, no people," he remembered, echoing an old description of this montane region. "We were scared of the ethnic people because we did not know one another," he recalled. "Now," thirty years later, he declared, "we are no longer scared because we are already united."

Behind this outward talk of unity, I realized, lay silently its dialectical twin, *disunity*. Only a few days earlier, Mr. L had said that fighting had characterized relations between Thái groups before "liberation" in 1954; and that Kinh people had arrived to "unify" both groups as well as "the country." Mr. D now added to the portrait of unity and disunity in an area of non-Thái groups: for him, the lived experience of disunity inspired fear even after "reunification" in 1975. In spite of their

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<sup>6</sup> Conversation, Trung tâm xã Núa Ngam, huyện Điện Biên, 24 Aug 2006.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Thái Bình's connections with Điện Biên, cf., Tạ Long & Ngô Thị Chính, *Sự Biến Đổi nền Nông nghiệp Châu Thổ-Thái Bình ở Vùng núi Điện Biên Lai Châu* (Hanoi: NXB Nông nghiệp, 2000).

different backgrounds and social positions, both informants defined unity in terms of harmonious relations between ethnicities (*dân tộc*) and endowed the Kinh people with power to unify them. Unlike the head of Núa Ngam's Fatherland Front, however, the retired Farmers' Association leader implied that unification was an ongoing, power-laden process. The claim to already-achieved unity came from Mr. D who, like my minder, was an official from Thái Bình. More broadly, I observed that virtually all of Điện Biên's district and provincial officials, and many in its subordinate communes, self-identify as Kinh. As state agents recognized as "Kinh people," they embody a particularly salient form of social difference and give it everyday power.

These conversations and others like them directed my attention to the making of a "unified" nation out of multiple and diverse forms of socially different peoples, especially the form recognized as "ethnicity." I discovered that nationalism in Vietnam—or the idea that all people within its borders rise above other forms of association to become "unified" as members of an imagined "Vietnamese" community—was and still is a project. Such everyday discovery inspired me to learn more about the making of state in Điện Biên, to investigate how the formation of singular rule challenged, contested, and reworked multiple social differences and local power relations. Making Vietnam in Điện Biên Phủ was, and still remains, a historical process embedded in state power to regulate communal spaces and categories, legitimate and illegitimate political forms, as well as resource use and allocation.

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This dissertation examines the ongoing processes of state formation and nation-making that constructed the Black River region as Northwest Vietnam. It focuses on the decade between 1945-1955 when a border outpost, Điện Biên Phủ, became a centrally marginal place in an emergent Vietnam. Covering a crucial period when French colonial rule gave way to nation-state rule, this account of remaking a

frontier—and with it, the categories and affiliations of the people within—underscores the extent to which both forms of domination, colonial and national, required local cooperation and the reconfiguration of spatially specific hierarchies.<sup>8</sup>

The dissertation takes seriously the placement and displacement of the people of the Black River region. Though marginal in terms of cultural and physical distance from the rising political center of Hanoi, Điện Biên Phủ's reconstruction as a site of “national victory” in 1954 made it central to ideas of national unity and state territorial integrity.<sup>9</sup> The architects and actors who built the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), those seeking to overturn French colonialism, saw their task as building a new national body whose parts encompassed the people and land of the Black River region. In order to accomplish their task, DRV architects and actors both had to present themselves as state and convince local people, seen as a “unified” society, that they fell within their legitimate power.

### ***Mobilization, legitimation, state formation***

I use the idea, practice, and process of mobilization as a way into thinking about legitimation and the negotiated practices that served to construct Vietnamese state and society. To do this, I draw on archival Vietnamese-language sources to focus on a violent and tumultuous decade in the 1940s and 1950s when the people and place of Điện Biên Phủ and the Black River region entered into a lasting relationship with the people, space, and idea of Vietnam. Examining how mobilization shaped, and was reshaped by, emerging political relations reveals a complex, uneven process

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<sup>8</sup> Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Mary Steedly, “The State of Culture Theory in the Anthropology of Southeast Asia,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 431-54; Donald Moore, *Suffering for Territory: Race, Place, and Power in Zimbabwe* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm (1979); Nguyễn Hữu Hợp & Nguyễn Hữu Đạo, “Sức mạnh tổng hợp của cả nước và chiến thắng Điện Biên Phủ,” in Viện sử học, *Mấy Vấn đề về chiến thắng lịch sử Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1985), 89-106.



marked by multiple inclusions and exclusions. Although mobilization became a dominant state tactic only in 1953, the process drew on and reproduced uncertain social, communal, and spatial boundaries.

Investigating legitimization and mobilization in the Black River region during the 1950s opens inter-related discussions of unmaking colonial rule, making national rule, and remaking locally configured ruling relations. This was the work of constituting state and society. In Vietnamese, what most frequently linked evolving conceptions of state and society was a range of verbs—*huy động*, *phát động*, *tác động*, *vận động*, *động viên*—each containing the Sino-Vietnamese particle “*động*” which means, “to move or stir.”<sup>10</sup> In English, “to mobilize” closely captures the Vietnamese verbs’ literal and figurative meanings, ranging in transitive power from inanimate objects to human subjects, from individuals to collectives.<sup>11</sup> In this socio-linguistic context, political agents and institutions put people into motion, acting on them and influencing their behavior in support of centrally directed goals.

DRV cadres and Viet Minh activists developed and deployed mobilization as a novel means of making claims on agrarian labor, land, capital, and subjecthood.<sup>12</sup> Much more than simply altering resource availability in a contested political environment, mobilization was an organizational tactic *and* a complex social process.<sup>13</sup> As tactic, mobilization drew on and produced disciplinary power to reorder

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<sup>10</sup> Phan Văn Các, *Từ Điển Hán Việt* (TP HCM: NXB Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2003), 163-164.

<sup>11</sup> Đặng Chấn Liêu et al, *Từ điển Việt-Anh* (TP HCM: NXB Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> For current social science perspectives on mobilization, cf., Andrew Walder, “Political Sociology and Social Movements,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 35(2009): 402; J. Craig Jenkins and William Form, “Social Movements and Social Change,” in *The Handbook of Political Sociology*, ed. Thomas Janoski et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 331-349; Joel Andreas, “The Structure of Charismatic Mobilization: A Case Study of Rebellion During the Chinese Cultural Revolution,” *American Sociological Review* 72 (2007): 434-458; Susan Olzak et al, “School desegregation, interracial exposure, and antibusing activity in contemporary urban America,” *American Journal of Sociology* 100 (June 1994): 196-241; ; R. Ray and A.C. Korteweg, “Women's Movements in the Third World: Identity, Mobilization, and Autonomy,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 25(Aug 1999): 47-71.

<sup>13</sup> John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *American Journal of Sociology* 82 (1977), 1212-1241; Bob Edwards and John McCarthy, “Resources

space, time, and community. As social process, mobilization shaped and was shaped by already existing and newly emerging social and spatial boundaries. In spaces later recognized as Vietnam and during a time when a Vietnamese community was violently in the making, mobilization was an “everyday form of state formation” or, a tactic central to remaking quotidian relations between rulers and subjects.<sup>14</sup>

During the first Indochina War (1946-54) state was not given but was itself some thing against which people struggled and that which they sought to construct.<sup>15</sup> At the middle of this ambivalent stance was the Vietnam Workers’ Party (VWP) which in 1951 emerged publicly, positioned itself to lead a movement against French colonial rule, and used military force and emerging state institutions to establish national rule.<sup>16</sup> If considering revolutions as “emergent phenomena” helps explain institutional outcomes, then I argue that refocusing on legitimation embedded in the Party’s mobilization agenda explains why these outcomes appeared in state form—though not always as intended.<sup>17</sup>

Using mobilization to think about state power raises historiographic and analytic questions about why, and whether, people in the Black River region joined in the project of making Vietnam. In an oft-quoted statement, Karl Deutsch defined social mobilization as “the process in which major clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people become available for

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and Social Movement Mobilization,” in David Snow et al, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 116-152

<sup>14</sup> Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> For accounts that associate “politics” with contests over a government already formed and equate state power with given institutions “responding” to movement action, cf., Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), 5, 155; Jack Goldstone, *States, Parties, and Social Movements* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Dang Phong and Melanie Beresford, *Authority Relations and Economic Decision-Making in Vietnam* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1998), 24-25

<sup>17</sup> Jack Goldstone, “Toward a fourth generation of revolutionary theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001): 139-187.

new patterns of socialization and behavior.” Although Deutsch identified mobilization as a transformative process, his explanation of why or how it “happens” only points to coincident “certain historical situations and stages of economic development.”<sup>18</sup> The making of Vietnam complicates this narrative. Even if war with Japanese and French “foreign invaders” provided conditions in favor of nationalist mobilization, “the Vietnamese,” writes Patricia Pelley, “were internally divided” and “struggled violently among themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Such divisions belie appearances of national unity, particularly in the Black River region where social cleavages assumed ethnicized forms: French colonial rule empowered Thái elites in a space claimed by Kinh elites as integral to national territory. Analytically, to focus only on given warfare still fails to explain why and how political elites mobilized overwhelmingly rural populations.

As much as episodic war, chronic rural inequalities created conditions favorable for mobilizing nationalist sentiment as well as a platform for an emerging vanguard party. National liberation in Vietnam accelerated in tandem with a mass movement for VWP-led social transformation lasting well beyond the French war’s end in 1954, particularly through land reform (1953-57) and collectivization (1959-1970s).<sup>20</sup> Anti-colonial warfare and agrarian transformation were highly contested projects among ostensibly unified proponents of national liberation, yet both

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Deutsch, “Social Mobilization and Political Development,” *American Political Science Review* 55 (1961), 494. His modernizationist perspective influenced scholars of the Chinese revolution who argue that war with Japan provided “certain conditions” under which social mobilization became a “crucial occurrence in the onset of nationalism.” Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 26-27; Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 106.

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the Vietnamese revolution’s dual goals, see Truong Chinh, *Truong Chinh: Selected Writings* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1994), 321-323; “Hoàn thành giải phóng dân tộc, phát triển dân chủ nhân dân, tiến tới chủ nghĩa xã hội,” Feb 1951, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 12, yr 1951 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2001), 73-76. These processes re-emerged in southern Vietnam following DRV absorption of the Republic of Vietnam and establishment of the Socialist Republic in 1975. Cf., Ngô Vĩnh Long, “Some Aspects of Cooperativization in the Mekong Delta,” in *Postwar Vietnam*, ed. David Marr and Christine White (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1988), 163-173.

nonetheless involved unprecedented mass political participation. This groundswell of rural political engagement sparked enduring questions as to how and why the peasantry becomes mobilized.<sup>21</sup> These questions remain crucial to understanding the terms on which this agrarian hinterland became enmeshed in political organizing that was both nationalist and class-based. Conditions of warfare and agrarian inequality, then, enabled an elite to cultivate nationalism and promote radical social change to legitimate and institutionalize their political power.

When anti-colonial warfare broke out in the Black River region, propaganda—i.e., mass political education—featured prominently as accompaniment to organized force. Just as legitimation accompanied coercion, so too did coercion back up legitimation.<sup>22</sup> Programs predicated on coercion and consent worked in tandem and their means varied in relation to one another. During the guerilla phase between 1945-50, armed propaganda teams worked clandestinely to make revolutionary contact, to secure cooperation, and, at times, to intimidate or eliminate opposition. When guerilla tactics shifted to mobile warfare in late 1952 and changed again in early 1954 to fixed positions, cadres accompanied regular troops, organized study sessions to educate local people, and endeavored to mobilize them. They brought along a new police force and surveillance techniques capable of keeping watch over both friend and enemy.

Among their most important lessons was how to distinguish between “friend” and “enemy.” This strategy calls to mind jurist Carl Schmitt’s idea of the political, which, he argues, results from recognizing and making this distinction in a moment of

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<sup>21</sup> Eric Wolf, “Peasants and Political Mobilization: Introduction,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 17 (1975), 385-388; Alvin So, “Peasant Conflict and the Local Predatory State in the Chinese Countryside,” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 34 (2007): 560-581.

<sup>22</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1999). I expand my discussion of coercion and militarization in Chapter 5.

existential crisis.<sup>23</sup> Although this strategy may have motivated cadres politically, its failure to work as planned in the Black River region reveals theoretical and empirical limitations. Schmitt's core assumption, i.e. that "the concept of the state presupposes the concept of the political," absolves state-making of any political content and cannot account for how cadres used legitimation work to construct nation and state mutually.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, that legitimation frequently failed suggests that binary categories were insufficient to capture, transform, and unify peoples of multiple and shifting identifications. Finally, "politics" in this rural hinterland, as scholars of agrarian societies remind us, extended also to the means and ends of agricultural production. Cadres were well aware of agrarian inequalities and capitalized on material shortages by incorporating the provision of capital and consumption goods into their mass education curriculum. In the process, they created new circuits of reciprocal exchange among an emergent community.

If it remains important to think about mobilization as a social process, then its use by elites to move masses calls for thinking of it as a tactic as well. Doing so points to its historical specificity and explains its deployment at a time when an emerging DRV could and did benefit from its intended effects—creating a society and territory subject to its rule. A technique of modern statecraft specific to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mobilization emerged when two trajectories—formation of mass politics and legible societies—intersected to make population management both possible and desirable.<sup>25</sup> Lineages of postcolonial legibility in the Black River region, like other corners of former French empire, grew out of colonial ethnology, a powerful project to know, categorize, and manipulate subjects.<sup>26</sup> Mobilization increased legibility: it built on,

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<sup>23</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26-27.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> Amir Weiner, *Landscaping the Human Garden* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2-3; James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> George Trumbull, *An Empire of Facts: Colonial Power, Cultural Knowledge, and Islam in Algeria*,

expanded, and intensified already existing programs of agricultural taxation and labor recruitment. All worked reciprocally as resource claims and unfolded iteratively as processes of learning about agrarian subjects and their productive capacities. As a capacity and prerogative of state, then, mobilization required knowledge of, and contributed to the making of, society.

Similarly, mobilization as a mass form of legitimation drew on and extended construction of the state idea. As Philip Abrams has written, “the idea of the state” is not the location of “reality” but is, instead, an effect of legitimation—itsself the façade—which “conceals the actual disunity of political power.”<sup>27</sup> The institutional segments jostling to rule an emergent Vietnam worked to present themselves as *the* state, singular and solid. If labor recruitment and taxation presented the DRV as unified in aims and programs, then I show how a decision in 1953 to limit mass mobilization for land reform revealed splits within an unsteady political coalition that represented itself as always already unified. “Unity” was not just a desired outcome of making a national society; it was also a means of reifying power.

By attending to the institutionalization and legitimation of DRV power *and* to the construction of categories used to describe these processes and their outcomes, I examine what Abrams called “politically organized subjection” and rethink the role of legitimation in producing ideas of state conflated with nation and party.<sup>28</sup> Studying the observed disunity of political coalitions push what scholars of contentious politics call “claim making” beyond what social movements do to include taken-for-granted analytical categories as well.<sup>29</sup> Even Weber’s famous definition of state—“a human

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1870-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1 (1988), 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Motion: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 144; Tilly and Tarrow (2007), 35.

community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of force* within a given territory”—contains a claim made with regards to its own legitimacy that simultaneously accomplishes and conceals political domination.<sup>30</sup> Uninterrogated descriptions and seemingly neutral names, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer observe, “are in fact impositional claims.”<sup>31</sup> Here, then, is a strong argument to study mobilization as political practice that produces a particular, historically specific idea of institutionalized power. In post World War II-era Vietnam, political actors, many of whom were VWP members and local elites recognized as DRV officials, wielded a state idea to justify claims on an evolving, newly discovered, mass society. Although mobilization did not appear concretely until 1953, its use and deployment built on and initiated longer cycles of legitimation always backed by coercion.

“State” and “society,” then, arise mutually both as entangled analytical constructs and as powerful terms of political legitimation. To delineate a boundary between state and society and make the former appear a “real” objective structure, writes Timothy Mitchell, is itself “a product of political processes” specific to modern forms of power.<sup>32</sup> Boundaries, he rightly notes, permeate knowledge categories as well.<sup>33</sup> Rather than separate state and society into neat analytical units, Mitchell advocates starting with their “uncertain boundary” and its generation through powerful regulatory and disciplinary practices.<sup>34</sup> Even if cadres’ propaganda efforts often failed to impart a distinction between friend and enemy, for example, their legitimation work exemplified practices of boundary making. Likewise, the Party derived power not only

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<sup>30</sup> Italics in original. Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber*, ed. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 7.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics,” *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991), 78.

<sup>33</sup> Cf., Michele Lamont and Marcel Fournier, eds., *Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Lamont and Virag Molnar, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167-195.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell (1991), 89, 92. Cf., Akhil Gupta, “Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state,” *American Ethnologist* 22 (1995): 375-402.

from influencing institutions directly through leadership and personnel recruitment but, also, from its ability to regulate uncertain boundaries between them.

### ***Making boundaries***

Writing a history of Dien Bien Phu in this period requires reading archival sources and silences. Like other state institutions, the national archive that imposes its claim on the Black River region and its people, frames its claim—to use Corrigan and Sayer’s words—as “seemingly neutral, natural, universal, obvious,” and denies the uncertainty of boundaries either geographic or analytic.<sup>35</sup> To write this history, to read one’s way into the silences and ambiguities, is to linger over the social construction of boundaries. Doing so leads this inquiry in three inter-related directions regarding temporality, nationality, and spatiality.

First, temporal boundaries structure historical inquiry in and of Vietnam in general and Điện Biên Phủ in particular. Issues of periodization, historical silences, nationalist historiography, and archival access are enduring themes in this dissertation. I argue that periodization, for example, is a structuring effect of historic and ongoing legitimation work. Documentary organization, Corrigan argues, is itself a form of rule and ruling.<sup>36</sup> His insight opens space for renewed engagement with the power underlying state archives and historical production.<sup>37</sup> Histories of Vietnam often begin or end in 1954 when the People’s Army defeated French Expeditionary Forces at Điện Biên Phủ. In so doing, these narratives discount the contemporaneous Geneva negotiations (resulting in partition) in favor of recounting a fetishized rupture, a clean

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<sup>35</sup> Corrigan and Sayer (1985), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Corrigan, “State Formation,” in Joseph and Nugent, eds. (1994), xvii.

<sup>37</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Anne Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).



national break with the colonial past.<sup>38</sup> By bounding struggle to a year-long period in 1953-54, militarist nationalist histories of Điện Biên Phủ magnify the legitimization effect—mystifying historical antecedents and obscuring subsequent and ongoing struggles. I challenge naturalized and taken-for-granted temporal boundaries by offering a longer history attentive to continuities, changes, and transformations. I also respond to a scholarly call for renewed attention to understudied aspects of Vietnamese history and, along the way, attend to ways in which this history's telling became Vietnamized.<sup>39</sup>

Second, just as communal categories of “ethnicity” and “nation” have evolved in relation to one another through a long and complicated process, so has the unstable boundary between them. Ideas of social difference result from complex processes of recognition, or what Katherine Verdery calls “a play between ascription and self-ascription.”<sup>40</sup> The remarkably diverse, multiple, and mutable suite of languages, cultural habits, and social relations found in montane Southeast Asia provide fertile ground for investigating how processes of recognition change in relation to emerging states and evolving nations. Drawing on research conducted in the hills of Burma, Edmund Leach reconceptualized “static social systems” in favor of historical terms like process, instability, and change. His analysis of how Kachins “become” Shans demonstrates the insufficiency of “exact categories” for demarcating and cataloging

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<sup>38</sup> Notable exceptions are Pelley (2002); Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); Mark Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> A diplomatic historian writes in a recent review: “The Vietnamese dimensions of the French war remain the least studied of any aspect of the conflict. We know comparatively little about the Vietnamese state’s prosecution of the war, the development of the party, state, and military apparatus during the period of war, and the ways in which individual Vietnamese apprehended their experiences of war.” Bradley, “Making Sense of the Vietnam War: The Postcolonial Moment and the First Vietnam War, 1945-1954,” in *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crisis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 27.

<sup>40</sup> Katherine Verdery, “Ethnicity, nationalism, and state-making,” in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’*, ed. Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), 37.

forms of social difference that, empirically, change over time.<sup>41</sup> Observing that hill and valley terrains correspond to variable livelihood strategies and forms of socio-cultural organization, Leach explained such differences as historically and relationally generated. Over centuries, migrants settled these varying altitudinal gradients, drew on multiple traditions, developed niche-sensitive agricultures and trading patterns, and coined linguistic expressions—i.e., “ethnicity”—to recognize one another. Insofar as a taken-for-granted country name obscures both underlying social difference and a cultural / political project of territorial domination, Leach’s analysis of “Burma” applies as well to my analysis of “Vietnam.”<sup>42</sup>

If ascription and self-description produce unstable recognitions, then the processes of modern state formation tend towards fixing a given subject or group with a singular identity. State-making changes the dynamic interplay of recognition, putting power behind ascription to institute a given, fixed identity for political subjects. Similar to the taxonomies colonial ethnologists constructed and deployed to render Tonkin’s montane societies legible, architects of the DRV state developed the idea of nationality or ethnicity (*dân tộc*) to catalog its subjects. Nationalist ideology worked in tandem with state-making to elevate a “national” form of identity (i.e., being Vietnamese) and then subordinated others to “ethnic” identifications (i.e., being Khu Mu, Hmong, Thái, etc.). Mobilizing multiple and diverse peoples created a power-laden field of recognition. That peoples populating a territorial frontier became known as “ethnic minorities” is comparatively new, resulting from a state form that served to consolidate a nationalist ideology.<sup>43</sup> In modern Vietnam, everyone has a national identity and an ethnicity, although belonging to the “national majority,” or being Kinh,

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<sup>41</sup> E.R. Leach, *The Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 8-9.

<sup>42</sup> E.R. Leach, “The Frontiers of ‘Burma,’” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3 (1960): 49-68.

<sup>43</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons* (New York: Verso, 1998), 318; Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999), 840-41.

frequently goes unstated. In sum, as Verdery writes, “national ideologies sort the world into ‘kinds of people’ who relate to an actual or potential political entity known as a state (hence, ‘nation-state’).”<sup>44</sup> I trace powerful efforts to regulate communal boundaries and their disciplinary effects—alternately joining communities together or pulling them apart.

Third, attending to boundary-making in this frontier calls for discussing the processes and practices of spatial regulation. Building on Abrams and Mitchell, K. Sivaramakrishnan advances what he calls “statemaking,” defined as the “process of drawing lines between state and society... by organizing political subjection within a defined territory and imbuing this distinction with legitimacy.”<sup>45</sup> I interpret the process of defining state territory to be another mode of claim-making, one inseparable from and constitutive of sovereign state power.<sup>46</sup> Attending to statemaking’s spatial dimensions contributes to understanding how state power is actualized in local politics and territorialized through strategies of rural resource control.<sup>47</sup> Studying legitimization and mobilization on an emerging frontier of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam throws into sharp relief the making of state as an historical and spatial process. Relations of rule were—and still remain—spatially constituted, distributed unevenly, and contingent on negotiation between central direction and local autonomy.

My critical state formation perspective shares with social movement scholars a conviction that studies of mobilization must include space as a “constituent aspect” of contentious politics. To think about collective action’s “spatial effects” means not accepting administrative units *ipso facto* as given variables but, rather, studying prior

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<sup>44</sup> Verdery (1994), 50.

<sup>45</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 8-9.

<sup>46</sup> Peter Sahlin, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>47</sup> Tsing (1993); Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Peluso, “Territorialization and State Power in Thailand,” *Theory and Society* 24 (1995): 385-426.

and ongoing construction of spatial boundaries.<sup>48</sup> Districts in the DRV's emergent Northwest Region inherited and incorporated spatial units, known as *muang*, originally formed in the pre-colonial era by early Thái-speaking settler communities. The *muang* governed land administration, labor allocation, residence, and rule and formed the basis for subsequent and enduring territorial administration.<sup>49</sup> Studying practices of spatial regulation also highlights underlying conceptions of sovereignty. In contrast to the unfixed borders found in the Black River region's pre-colonial confederation of Thái *muang*, both the French colonial regime and the Vietnamese nation-state staked claims to homogenous, bounded space.<sup>50</sup> Colonial and national rule shared an underlying regime of territoriality based on the demarcation and defense of linear borders; and the internalization and singularization of frontier spaces. By incorporating Thái *muang* elites and privileging them as officials, dialectically opposed political regimes unintentionally reproduced internal frontiers both imbued with ethnicity and contingent on localized political relations.

The context of my inquiry can be located in what James Scott has called "Zomia," a mountainous frontier of staggering ecological, linguistic, and cultural variety whose incorporation has long troubled lowland statemaking projects.<sup>51</sup> Following Scott, I use the term "frontier" to refer to a peopled terrain of relative autonomy and isolation always socially constructed in relation to centers of power.<sup>52</sup> Although frontiers can be thought of as zones of encounter where peoples meet in a neutral "middle ground" and engage in processes of transculturation, I study a period

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<sup>48</sup> David Cunningham and Benjamin Phillips, "Contexts for Mobilization: Spatial Settings and Klan Presence in North Carolina, 1964-1966," *American Journal of Sociology* 113 (2007), 785, 788.

<sup>49</sup> David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (Chiang Mai: Silkwood, 2003), 6-8; Cẩm Trọng and Hữu Ưng, "Chế độ ruộng công và hình thái xã hội của người Thái Tây-Bắc trước đây," *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 151(1973): 50-57.

<sup>50</sup> Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Cf., Willem Van Schendel, "Geographies of Knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002): 647-668.

<sup>52</sup> Scott (2009), 19.

of unequal power relations and organized violence.<sup>53</sup> Although the Zomian frontier can also be thought of as a borderland, or an area of multiply contested boundaries and territorial claims, I use the term in a more restrictive sense.<sup>54</sup> My narrative begins in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when colonial cartographers worked with local powerbrokers to construct boundaries between Indochina's protectorates of Tonkin and Laos against China. They transformed a borderland of fuzzy boundaries and overlapping territorial claims into an imperial frontier of linear borders and mutually exclusive, sovereign territorial claims. Half a century later, World War II and then revolutionary war contested these boundaries anew.

That the colonial boundaries did eventually remain in place, and take on a particular new meaning, was far from foreordained. If, as historian Mark Bradley argues, "the outcome of the French war in Vietnam was always a contingent one," then I would add that the territorial shape, political relations, and social composition of Vietnam itself were also contingent.<sup>55</sup> Unmaking colonial spatial distinctions and remaking them as intra- and interstate borders required intensive legitimation work. What Mr. L called "liberation" in 1954 was simultaneously a longer social process greeted with deep ambivalence as well as an iterative, self-conscious state project aimed at territorial consolidation and legitimation. If borders refer to a line demarcating state sovereignty then, as a consequence of modern nationalisms' association of communal membership with territory, these lines had to be reconstructed as the *national* community's spatial extent.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>54</sup> Adelman and Aron (1999), 815; Giersch (2006), 3; Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, "Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands," *Journal of World History* 8 (1997), 211-242.

<sup>55</sup> Bradley (2009), 73.

<sup>56</sup> Lucien Febvre, "Frontière: the Word and the Concept," in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973); Sahlins (1989).

Associating nation with territory, however, raised a profound and vexing issue for historical actors in the early 1950s, known as the “ethnicity question” (*vấn đề dân tộc*). Were so-called ethnicities entitled to territory? What was an ethnicity? What was a nationality? Who were the Vietnamese? Although these questions remain largely *unsettled*, political elites performed acrobatic legitimization work to regulate boundaries between these unstable categories. DRV and Party leaders settled on a temporary solution: limited self-rule for “ethnic minorities.” In 1955, the DRV recognized the Black River region as the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone which, at 55,000 square kilometers, covered an enormous 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of DRV territory; or “1/6<sup>th</sup> the entire country” (i.e., a claim to an imaginary “Vietnam” composed, also, of the break-away southern Republic of Vietnam).<sup>57</sup> In its contemporary and historic forms, Vietnam is and was the outcome of contingent and multiply dialectical processes: pitting revolutionary liberation against colonial exploitation; proposing national unity versus ethnic division; defining a national self in relation to an ethnic or foreign other. I focus on a moment in the 1950s when the making of a national frontier was particularly contested, contingent, spatially uneven, and violent. I share with critical scholars of the American west their rejection of a triumphalist frontier narrative of inevitable expansion, incorporation, and assimilation.<sup>58</sup>

Vietnam has its own frontier narratives to accompany population movements and territorial reconfigurations.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps most explicitly, the “southern advance” (*nam tiến*) posits an inevitable expansion of Việt/Kinh peoples southwards to fill out

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<sup>57</sup> Ủy ban Hành chính Khu tự trị Thái Mèo, “Tình hình khái quát về Khu tự trị dân tộc Thái Mèo ở Tây-Bắc,” May 1955, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 22, p. 1; UBHC KTTTB, “Báo cáo những nét khái quát về tình hình chung của Khu tự trị Thái Mèo,” 10 July 1960, NAVC 3, file no. 208, p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Adelman and Aron (1999).

<sup>59</sup> On population distributions, agriculture, and territory in comparative regional perspective, cf., Rodolphe De Koninck, “The Peasantry as the Territorial Spearhead of the State in Southeast Asia,” *Sojourn* 11 (1996), 231-258; De Koninck and Steven Déry, “Agricultural Expansion as a Tool of Population Redistribution in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 28 (1997), 1-26.

the S-shaped boundaries of the modern nation-state. Keith Taylor challenges representations of this supposed “singular event” by attending to linguistic and historical detail to counterpose regional histories composed of unsteady, shifting power relations.<sup>60</sup> What Mr. L mentioned as “clearing the wilderness” (*khai hoang*) was more than just the name of a state-sponsored migration program. Clearing the wilderness also figures as another determinist organizing principle narrating allegedly continuous Việt/Kinh expansion stretching from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Trần dynasty to the 19<sup>th</sup> c. Nguyễn court, through French colonial rule, and culminating in the DRV’s first five-year plan in 1960.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, stories of “national victory” at Điện Biên Phủ over-determine an outcome by structuring narratives in terms of resistance, revolution, unity, and anti-colonialism all oriented towards a foreordained, singular endpoint.<sup>62</sup> All three narrative approaches adhere to an underlying telos: projecting the territorial shape of “Vietnam” backwards in time to explain its ultimate borders with Laos, Cambodia, and China. Furthermore, they associate Vietnamese-ness with Kinh settlement, overlooking histories of violence with, and silencing trajectories of, multiple and diverse peoples. By contrast, I approach this frontier by attending to alternative trajectories, silences, and linguistic detail in order to retell a story of mutual accommodations and historical contingencies.

In many ways, as my conversations above indicate, the area in and around Điện Biên Phủ remains a frontier, pointing to how its “zonal character,” writes Peter Sahllins, “persists after the delimitation of a boundary line.”<sup>63</sup> By describing local

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<sup>60</sup> Keith Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 949-978. Cf., Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid, eds., *Vietnam: Borderless Histories* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

<sup>61</sup> Nguyễn Khắc Đạm, “Vai trò của nhà nước về vấn đề khai hoang trong lịch sử Việt-Nam” and *Ibid.* “(tiếp theo)” in *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 39 (1962a), 5-14 and 40 (1962b), 31-40. Pelley observes that these narratives “obscure the historicity of frontiers” (2002), 70-71.

<sup>62</sup> Cf., Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm, *Điện Biên trong lịch sử* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1979); Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Huyện Điện Biên* (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> Sahllins (1989), 4.

conditions in terms of “spacious land, no people,” Mr. D echoed a pervasive representation dating to the 1940s when local elites began a lasting engagement with an emergent political, cultural, and demographic center. The description of upstream montane conditions in terms of land abundance and population scarcity was constructed in relation to its obverse: downstream delta conditions of land scarcity and population abundance.<sup>64</sup> In spite of a half-century of domestic migration to this frontier from Thái Bình and other Red River Delta sending sites, profoundly different average population densities continue to characterize Vietnam’s northern lowland and highland, or downstream/upstream, regions.<sup>65</sup> Comparing them in a national frame renders the delta “crowded” or “dense” and the mountains “sparse” and “spacious.”

These same (mis)representations function ideologically to legitimate various state projects and failures over time. Mr. D himself participated in one such development and migration project and, as a result, moved from “crowded” Thái Bình to “spacious” Núi Ngang in 1976. In an earlier era, officials used a discourse of “sparse land, few people” to perform a tremendous amount of legitimation work. In 1949, an officialized Thái elite invoked the phrase to complain that the DRV’s standard administrative units were a poor fit with local norms of space and patterns of settlement.<sup>66</sup> Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone officials in 1956- 1957 drew on the phrase, often in the first lines of their respective reports, to express a variety of concerns. Some fretted about frontier security and insecurity among politically wayward “ethnic minorities,” reminding their superiors in Hanoi that the Zone’s international borders

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<sup>64</sup> Or, “Thái Bình đất chật người đông” for the delta versus “đất rộng người thưa” for the uplands. Cf., Tạ Long & Ngô Thị Chính (2000), 40.

<sup>65</sup> As of 2008, Thái Bình Province reported a population of 1,879,200 and an area of 1559 square km, or 1201 people per km<sup>2</sup>; Điện Biên Province reported a population of 475,600 and an area of 9563 km<sup>2</sup>, or 50 people per km<sup>2</sup>. Tổng cục Thống kê, “Dân số và mật độ dân số năm 2008 phân theo địa phương.” Accessed 22 Feb 2010 at <<http://www.gso.gov.vn/default.aspx?tabid=387&idmid=3&ItemID=8637>>.

<sup>66</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo UBKCHC LT Sơn Lai 3 tháng 7,8,9 năm 1949,” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 12-14.



stretched along China and Laos for 700 km.<sup>67</sup> Others drew on the phrase to grumble about the region's "backward economy and agriculture," justifying failures to increase production according to centrally-issued plans.<sup>68</sup> Still others used the phrase to complain about the persistence of "very backward ethnicities" to explain the failure of a civilization project to "advance culture" in line with nationally dominant norms.<sup>69</sup>

I argue that all of these (mis)characterizations tell more about the preoccupations of political elites than they do about the underlying conditions they purport to describe. By investigating the appearance of the "sparse land, few people" discourse in the late 1940s, I show how it conceals and reveals an emerging political alliance between Thái elites and central leaders eerily similar to the colonial project they professed to replace: only this time, Kinh VWP leaders figured at the center, not French officials. Likewise, the DRV arrangement reproduced tensions and contradictions carried over from colonial forms of rule.

To say there were "no people" in Điện Biên, moreover, is not only empirically wrong but also obscures locally relevant, socially-produced differences. Disparities between hill and valley population densities repeat on a smaller scale within Điện Biên District, partially because of differing yields between forms of swidden and irrigated rice agriculture. My district minder, himself a proud Kinh migrant from Thái Bình, pointed to these (agri)cultural contrasts between Núa Ngam Commune's hill-dwelling Lao and Hmong swidden farmers and Thanh Xương's plain-dwelling Thái and Kinh wet-rice farmers.<sup>70</sup> Comparing plains and mountains on multiple spatial and temporal

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<sup>67</sup> UBHC KTTT, "Báo cáo công tác cải thiện đời sống vật chất và tinh thần cho nhân dân các d.t.," 10 Jan 1957, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2765, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> UBHC KTTT, "Dự thảo: Báo cáo tổng kết sản xuất nông lâm nghiệp trong 3 năm khôi phục (1955-1957)," 1957, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 3192, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Sở Văn Hoá, "Báo cáo tổng kết công tác văn hoá năm 1956 của Khu tự trị Thái Mèo," 1 Dec 1956, NAVC 3, phòng Bộ Văn hoá, file no. 10, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> As of 2005, Điện Biên District reported a population of 103,937 and a density of 63 people per km<sup>2</sup>; Thanh Xương Commune's was 7047 people and 367 people per km<sup>2</sup>; Núa Ngam Commune's was 5283 people and 43 people per km<sup>2</sup>. Data collected from Statistical Office, Dien Bien District, 21 Aug 2006.

scales throws into relief how ethnicized patterns of agriculture and settlement came to be. That Mr. D and Mr. L dwelled at length on ethnicity in terms of fear, conflict, and state regulation points to categorical instabilities specific to evolving forms of communal membership. Both the local head of the Fatherland Front and the retired Farmers' Association leader, as officials and residents, were simultaneously agents in and products of powerful and ongoing processes of national incorporation and state territorialization. Their highly regulated identities—first Vietnamese and then Black Thái or Kinh—are products of boundary making embedded in these processes.

Even seemingly neutral place names contain the effects of powerful legitimation work. The name Điện Biên Phủ can be translated as “border post prefecture.”<sup>71</sup> *Phủ* is an old Sino-Vietnamese term for administrative unit dating back to Nguyễn dynasty rule, perhaps even earlier.<sup>72</sup> Although the royal designation of this prefecture as a post (*điện*) on an edge or line (*biên*) predates the actual demarcation of the border in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, its naming nonetheless staked a powerful territorial claim.<sup>73</sup> From the perspective of Vietnamese court and national center alike, the place name internalizes territory yet acknowledges its location on the edge of a sovereign domain. In short, calling this site a “border post prefecture” simultaneously incorporates its territory and marginalizes it.<sup>74</sup> Attending to local place names and spatial relations destabilizes what center-periphery relations the official name conceals and reveals. For Thái speakers, the name Mường Thanh (or, *muang* of heaven) calls to mind the place's historic, cultural, agricultural, and political centrality.<sup>75</sup> For residents

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<sup>71</sup> Bernard Fall offers another translation as “Seat of the Border County Prefecture” but I disagree with his assertion that Điện Biên Phủ “is not really a place name” because Mường Thanh is its “true name.” I argue that both serve as place names and neither one is more “true” than the other. Rather, each comes from different languages and serves different purposes. *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967), 22.

<sup>72</sup> Đỗ Văn Ninh, *Từ Điển Chức Quan Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Thanh Niên, 2006), 590.

<sup>73</sup> Cf., Bradley Davis, “States of Banditry: The Nguyen Government, Bandit Rule, and the Culture of Power in the post-Taiping China-Vietnam Borderlands” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2008).

<sup>74</sup> I am grateful to Hue-Tâm Ho Tai for encouraging this insight.

<sup>75</sup> Cẩm Trọng, *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1978), 45, 324-325.

of its plain and surrounding hills alike, the town of Điện Biên Phủ serves as a locus of activity in its own right: a provincial political capital, trading entrepot, and cultural center.<sup>76</sup> Both place names co-exist but each points to outcomes of differently conceived and located political projects. Whereas the place name Điện Biên Phủ is a product of a centrally produced, Vietnamese synoptic grid, Mường Thanh is a product of local Thái ideas of space, local rule, and community—a central, heavenly *muang*.

In sum, I use legitimation in and mobilization of a contested frontier to highlight practices and processes of statemaking. I also amend an understanding of mobilization inherited from literatures on social movements and comparative politics. If the former presents mobilization as a dynamic social process altering resource availability, then the latter illustrates how, in 1950s Vietnam, it was also a tactic, i.e. a movement initiated and directed by enmeshed Party, military, and DRV institutions. Yet, with rare exception, these literatures stop short of analyzing what mobilization produced in terms of the ideologically-loaded categories—such as nation and ethnicity; party, state, society; Northwest Zone and Vietnam—structuring political relationships.<sup>77</sup> The critical state formation literature suggests theoretical and methodological approaches to address this gap. Theoretically, an understanding of mobilization must incorporate analyses of boundary making and spatial regulation. Methodologically, a relational approach attentive to legitimation's terms and social effects guides this dissertation's study of how relations of rule were made, unmade, and transformed in time and space.

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<sup>76</sup> One Khu Mu woman in a highland village of Mường Phăng District described Điện Biên Phủ as “dusty, hot, crowded” to explain her reluctance to visit the “city” and her preference for the cool mountain air and comfort of a known community.

<sup>77</sup> For nuanced approaches to mobilization in Latin America, cf., Peter Houtzager and Marcus Kurtz, “The Institutional Roots of Popular Mobilization: State Transformation and Rural Politics in Brazil and Chile, 1960-1995,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 42 (2000): 394-424; Wendy Wolford, *This Land Is Ours Now* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2010).

### *Narrative sequences*

The ethnographic encounters above both foreground sustained inquiry into mutually constitutive processes and practices of statemaking and mobilization; and illustrate their lasting effects. The dissertation focuses overall on the 1950s, a moment leading to and through the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign when an evolving national community and emerging state power intersected to produce a version of Vietnam. To get to this moment, the analysis is historically sequential, chronologically overlapping, and extends beyond normative periodization. By attending carefully to historic and ongoing legitimation work, the argument explores the reconfiguration and regulation of social, spatial, and temporal boundaries. The dissertation illustrates how terms of legitimation not only structured the actions of historical actors but also exerted subtle influence on analytical categories still used to assess them.

With these ideas in mind, this dissertation is divided into five substantive chapters. The first two chapters provide background to the intensive legitimation that accompanied militarized state expansion discussed in the following three. In addition, the first two chapters present evidence to argue that statemaking reproduced relations, categories, and tensions of rule already evident in the colonial era.

Although legitimation work accompanying Vietnam's making was transformative in many ways, to investigate underlying relations of rule requires a longer historical perspective. I introduce the Black River region and offer a *longue durée* of its settlement, livelihood practices, and forms of political organization.<sup>78</sup> Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a local political confederation of multiple *muang* (the *Sipsongchauthai*, or “Twelve Thái Counties”) existed at the margins of multiply overlapping sovereign kingdoms. I argue that a crucial transformation occurred in the

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<sup>78</sup> Cf., Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences,” in *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe: Essays from Annales*, ed. Peter Burke (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Thái elites positioned themselves as arbiters, and beneficiaries, of rising imperial power. French colonial rule incorporated them into relations of rule predicated on a new regime of territoriality, repositioning and reconfiguring a borderlands confederation as a frontier of empire. Following World War II, reorganizing a colonial frontier as the Thái Federation amplified contradictions embedded in this alliance and generated support for an alternative.

That the Black River region would wind up in a space called Vietnam was far from pre-determined. The second chapter begins a narrative of Vietnamese state formation, its interruptions and discontinuities, and its multiple colonial legacies. The period from World War II's end to 1950 figures as an early stage in making an alternative political project based on recruiting Thái elites disaffected with the local-colonial alliance. Methodologically, I shift from a *longue durée* approach to an archival ethnography in order to query relations between knowledge and power, to investigate silences, and to interrogate the production of truth claims.<sup>79</sup> By ending the chapter on the dissolution of DRV institutions and the Thái Federation's renewal, I aim to illustrate contingencies, uncertainties, and breaks in what is all-too-often represented as a continuous, teleological, and linear revolutionary nationalist narrative.

The third substantive chapter discusses the DRV state-making project from 1951-1954 during a period of growing Party and military strength. I argue that central political elites drew on and generated power through regulating claims on space, place, and land. Actors such as President Hồ Chí Minh and Party Secretary Trường Chinh established boundaries of communal membership isomorphic with state space to legitimate military expansion into Vietnam's emerging Northwest Zone. Just as cadres incorporated place-based relations of rule into DRV institutions, regional and

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<sup>79</sup> Stoler (2009), 46-51; cf., Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms" and "Questions of Method," in *Michel Foucault: Power*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1994).

central political elites suspended land reform to re-empower, and win the loyalty of, a Thái landed elite. Poor peasants and local cadres expressed outrage over a perceived contradiction in the revolutionary program, exposing deep splits in ostensibly unified entities such as “nation” and “state.” Coincident with each of these policies, processes, and practices, the People’s Army enforced a monopoly claim on state territory.

Chapters five and six backtrack temporally, to 1952-1954, to explore how militarization, economic development, and institutional reorganization worked to secure claims on an emerging national society contained within expanding state territory. These processes were reciprocal. First, securing claims on agrarian labor and resources enabled the People’s Army to claim more territory; more territory enabled claims on a broader pool of labor and resources. Second, making a national economy was as much about material goods as it was about their symbolic significance. What I call the revolutionary exchange represented overt efforts to legitimate relations of rule by ameliorating conditions of material scarcity. Exchange relations contributed towards the making society and state as hierarchically ordered entities structuring reciprocal claims unfolding within, but not limited to, an emerging realm of “economy.” Although chapter five focuses on 1952-1953 and chapter six on 1953-54, both chapters incorporate methodological comparisons to explore themes of liberation, exchange, and civilian support for military coercion.

The deliberate strengthening of institutional capacity to know an agrarian population, to regulate its production, and to collect resources on behalf of the People’s Army worked iteratively. Successive rounds of state learning enabled a militarized practice of claim-making known as mobilization. Like the revolutionary exchange (which it partially displaced in 1953), mobilization was also a process which produced and reproduced ideological effects of state and society—known in vernacular as Government and people. Iterative state learning also enabled a particular

retelling of the Black River region's history. Institutional capacity to know and regulate society as such developed alongside planning and calculating military logistics as well as enumerating a population's ability to bear them. Nationalist and militarist tellings of the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign are saturated with numbers of laborers, days worked, tonnages of rice, etc. Narrative recounting, I argue, depends on prior acts of counting and accounting. Just as I highlight the emergence of numerological abstraction, I endeavor to retell a story of Điện Biên Phủ that brings humanity—in its concrete and wayward forms—back into the tale.

Although mobilization did generate massive amounts of labor and resources to move and feed a growing military, the process did not always produce results as intended. Hunger, anxiety, and population flight followed in the wake of each military campaign, threatening to unravel all the legitimation work that accompanied DRV statemaking. Highlighting the cyclicity of hunger and anxiety destabilizes a narrative tendency to recount social change in a linear fashion. Linearized narrative recounting also obscures alternative, dialectically produced trajectories stemming from statemaking's unintended consequences. As with the French colonial era, configuring central rule among Thái elites may have secured an international border with Laos and China but reproduced frontier spaces and social tensions within.

## CHAPTER 2

### FROM BORDERLANDS TO FRONTIER

#### *Locating a frontier*

This dissertation on frontier politics opens with the making of a frontier space in the Black River borderlands where the eastern Himalayan massif enters what is now Southeast and East Asia.<sup>1</sup> To refer to the Black River region prior to the consolidation of nation-state rule as “northwest Vietnam” is both to use an historical anachronism and to acknowledge a territorial claim projected retroactively. Only in 1954, following the defeat of French forces at Điện Biên Phủ in May and ratification of the Geneva Accords in July, does locating part of this region within the territory of “Vietnam” begin to make sense. Even then, however, the Geneva Accords produced two Vietnams, partitioned at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) in the south.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the DRV administered the Black River region for two decades as an Autonomous Zone (*Khu tự trị*), known from 1955 to 1962 as the “Thái-Mèo” and from 1962 to

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<sup>1</sup> The Black River begins in present-day China and its upper watershed is located there. For simplicity’s sake, I use the Black River region to refer to the lower watershed in present-day Vietnam.

<sup>2</sup> Even now, there is little consensus on what to call the political project—Vietnam or Viet Minh or DRV?—that contested French colonialism between 1945-54 and, after 1954, ruled northern Vietnam. In order to avoid confusion and to restore historical accuracy, the DRV refers to a statist project that emerged in 1945 and claimed monopoly rule between 1954-75; the Viet Minh was a united front organization which assumed multiple forms between 1941-1955 many of whose affiliates—but not all—were allied with the DRV project; Vietnam was an idea signifying an emergent and imagined national community associated ideologically with a particular territory. For supporting scholarship cf., David Marr, *Vietnam 1945: The Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), esp. 549; Mark Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Christopher Goscha, “Courting Diplomatic Disaster? The Difficult Integration of Vietnam into the Internationalist Communist Movement (1945-1950),” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1 (2006), 59-103; Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémy, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). For mixed perspectives, cf., Christopher Goscha and Christian Ostermann, eds., *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia (1945-1962)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Mark Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War: Colonial Conflict and Cold War Crises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). For contrasting opinions, cf., Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper, 1969); William Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996).



1975 as the “Northwest.” In 1975, when the two Vietnams merged, uniform territorial administration replaced regional autonomy, recognizing the Black River region as provinces of Sơn La and Lai Châu. In 2004, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam carved from these two provinces the province of Điện Biên.

This chapter begins when peoples of the Black River basin developed patterns of social relations, such as trade, tribute, and imperial dominations, distinctive to their own settlement histories and agro-ecological niches. From the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *Sipsongchauthai* organized this region and, amidst overlapping claims to its territory and peoples, formed a political center of its own. By drawing a linear boundary line in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, French colonial rule remade this borderlands region into a frontier and, until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, reoriented local political relations within the bounds of empire. From a semi-autonomous confederation displaying multiple sovereignty, French colonial rule transformed the *Sipsongchauthai* into a military territory located inside Tonkin’s boundaries and outside neighboring Laos and China. Even within Indochina’s colonial space, local leaders continued to exert a form of self-rule: Thái powerbrokers supported their own political and economic agenda by leveraging their frontier status and by reproducing local units of production and rule (the *muang*).<sup>3</sup> Accommodation and negotiation underlay the making of empire and, later, of nation-state.

The transition from borderlands to frontier was the first of two pivot points. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Đèo Văn Trì assisted early French explorers to map and relocate this territory within Tonkin’s border with Laos and within Indochina’s border with China; he also positioned himself and his family as the region’s rightful rulers. Through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, this region was administered as, and figured in relations

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<sup>3</sup> To avoid confusion, I spell this unit according to the Romanized Thái language (*muang* or *muăng*) rather than Romanized Vietnamese (*mường*). In Vietnam, the latter can also signify formal place names (such as Mường Lài) and a particular ethno-linguistic group (the Mường peoples).

of domination as, an imperial frontier. In 1931, for example, the French Indochinese Union was composed of five “countries” (*pays*): the colony of Cochinchina, two protectorates of Annam and Cambodia, and two “mixed administration” protectorates of Tonkin and Laos.<sup>4</sup> Mixed administration signified two forms of duality: first, empowering mandarins or “native” (*indigène*) officials, like Đèo Văn Trì, to rule indirectly; second, joining military and civil administrations in “military territories” (*territoires militaires*) along Indochina’s northern frontier with China.<sup>5</sup> These administrative distinctions also reproduced what French officials, geographers, and ethnographers constructed as binary, environmentally-determinist social categories of “mountains” and “delta.”<sup>6</sup> Until World War II, colonial officials recognized the mountainous Black River region as the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Territory and empowered White Thái Đèo clan members as officials to rule jointly.

The wake of World War II was another pivot point, a moment when a reorganizing imperial frontier overlapped temporally and spatially with an emergent national frontier. Between the defeat of Japan and the arrival of allied forces, nationalist leader Hồ Chí Minh declared the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s independence from France in September 1945 and headed its provisional government. His announcement posed a *national* claim to an emergent “Vietnam” configured from colonial territories and populations of Tonkin, Cochinchina, and Annam. Meanwhile, French statesman Charles de Gaulle had announced France’s intention to reestablish a colonial regime and, in 1945, began to (re)organize the Indochinese Federation. In 1948, colonial administrators worked with Đèo Văn Trì’s son, Đèo Văn Long, to establish the Thái Federation in an attempt to regain control of the Black River region.

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<sup>4</sup> Indochina also included one leased holding of Kouang-Tchéou-Wan, a port city on the Pearl River now known as Guangzhou in the People’s Republic of China. Cf., Sylvain Lévi, *Indochine*, vol. 1 (Paris: Société d’Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1931), 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5-31.

<sup>6</sup> Cf., Ch. Robequain, “Le pays et les hommes,” in *Indochine*, vol. 2, ed. Sylvain Lévi (1931), 7-43.

National and neocolonial political projects were antithetically posed but historically connected. On a frontier reproduced, claimed, and contested by these two projects, renewing local rule within French empire generated contradictions which, in turn, led to support for a national liberation movement.

The bulk of this dissertation focuses on the remaking of a frontier during a period of armed contest over a political center, a time also known as the first Indochina war (1946-54). In a pattern similar to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Black River region once again became a site of multiple claims on its territory and population. Unlike the *Sipsongchauthai*'s amorphous spaces and overlapping claims, however, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the region's bounded space structured contests for monopoly rule within a shared regime of territoriality.<sup>7</sup> On the edges of both a reorganizing Indochina and an emergent DRV, the Black River region's borders placed local residents in particular relationships regarding two centralizing political projects.<sup>8</sup> They had to choose carefully between aligning themselves with one or another project, between locating themselves on a frontier of new empire or evolving nation-state.

Here, I advance preliminary arguments, historical and historiographic,

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<sup>7</sup> I define "regime of territoriality" as a statist imperative to bound territory and rule its internal social space. Of course, as Michel Foucault reminds us, "government is not related to the territory, but to a sort of complex of men and things." I add that the bounded-ness of social relations structures the spatial limits of sovereign disciplinary and regulatory power. I also concur with Donald Moore that the "political technologies" used to exert a regime of territoriality also "encountered subjects and territories already embedded in ruling relations," and echo his effort to study "entanglements," or the "contingent constellations" produced and reproduced by successive political projects. Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, ed. Michel Senellart (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 96; Donald Moore, *Suffering for Territory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 5-9.

<sup>8</sup> Why Vietnamese nationalists converged on the idea of Vietnam and not Indochina has stimulated excellent scholarship in response to Benedict Anderson's comparison with Indonesian nationalism and Javanese nationalist leaders. In spite of Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence for "Vietnam" in 1945, over the next nine years the question of Vietnam or Indochina remained unsettled, a subject I revisit over the course of this study. Cf., Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), pp. 120-133; Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954* (Copenhagen: NIAS Reports no. 28, 1995); David Henley, "Ethnographic Integration and Exclusion in Anticolonial Nationalism: Indonesia and Indochina," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995), 286-324.

concerning the making of frontiers in relation to center(s) of power.

If frontiers represent territorial limits and jurisdictional zones of sovereign state power, as Peter Sahlins and Lucien Febvre suggest, then I would add that for makers of centralized states, frontiers represent also a *potential*, i.e. the expansive capacity of their sovereign power.<sup>9</sup> Yet to dwell on only one center tends to privilege one (powerful) perspective among others. Further, how to tell a history of a frontier exhibits a narrative tension between projecting backwards already-achieved, spatialized relations of power or tracing forward the contingent, uncertain process of making and transforming social relations in space. Historians of the American west have shown that the term “frontier” carries analytical baggage: pointing to the work of Frederick Jackson Turner, critics of his “frontier thesis” of 1893 highlight its underlying telos, “denoting a triumphalist and Anglocentric narrative of continental conquest.”<sup>10</sup> These critics contribute towards a broader historiographic shift, endeavoring to decenter nationalist or statist narratives of steady and inevitable territorial expansion.<sup>11</sup> In so doing, they enrich an analytical vocabulary, offering an idea of “borderlands” to signify multiply contested spaces, amplify the agency of local peoples, and restore contingency to historical trajectories.<sup>12</sup>

Although frontier and borderlands share similar properties, I follow this historiographic turn by offering definitions to highlight a historically specific

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California, 1989); Lucien Febvre, “*Frontière*: the Word and the Concept,” in *A New Kind of History*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *The American Historical Review* 104 (1999), 814-815.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 8-10.

<sup>12</sup> John Wunder and Pekka Hamalainen responded that Adelman and Aron “focus on a game of imperial chess,” neglect native American agency, and argue instead for understanding the latter on its own terms. Evan Haefeli calls for a more rigorous analytical distinction between borderlands and frontiers informed by comparative historical studies. I follow these insights by attending to local agency and the structural limits encountered and negotiated; and by showing that the Black River region’s movement from borderlands to frontier may have been sequential but displayed periods of overlap and was not pre-determined. Cf., Wunder and Hamalainen, “Of Lethal Places and Lethal Essays,” and Haefeli, “A Note on the Use of North American Borderlands,” *AHR* 104 (Oct., 1999), 1229-1334, 1222-1225.

transformation.<sup>13</sup> “Borderlands” refers to a lived center whose undefined space lies at the edges of multiple, overlapping sovereign claims. “Frontier” denotes a lived center whose delimited space lies on the edges of a singular claim. Frontier, then, means a transformed borderlands where one political center negotiates with local rulers to singularize rule and interiorize its territories and peoples.<sup>14</sup> If French empire transformed the Black River borderlands and produced a frontier in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, then opposing political projects—reorganizing French empire and emerging nation-state—converged on the initial transformation and, therefore, reproduced a frontier in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Notwithstanding this shared regime of territoriality, the DRV political project diverged from its predecessor regarding the terms and tactics of legitimation as well as the means and ends of production.

To take these historical and historiographic concerns seriously renders locating a frontier in space and time usefully problematic. Locating a frontier speaks both to competing political claims on its territory as well as to multiple histories of its subjects and their collective (dis)placements. Referring to “it,” as a given social fact in terms of contemporary or stable place names, is not a neutral exercise. One’s very choice of place names often betrays an *a priori* “conquest of illegibility,” or the effects of a political project to standardize and encode territory according to a synoptic administrative grid.<sup>15</sup> Spatial practices and representations are embedded in, and enabling of, powerful claims to territory. The lived experience of space is always

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<sup>13</sup> Frontiers and borderlands alike signal social relations in space existing on the fringes of, but always in relation to, centers of power. Neither given as such nor “empty” spaces, frontiers and borderlands are settled, if sometimes sparsely, by peoples who think of their melded social and natural environment as their own lived center. For another perspective, cf., Michiel Baud and Willem Van Schendel, “Toward a Comparative History of Borderlands,” *Journal of World History* 8 (1997): 211-242.

<sup>14</sup> I avoid the terms “interior” and “exterior” because this distinction accepts as social fact what (may) result territorially from the process of making singular rule. Although frontiers exist on the spatial margins of state control, I consider “periphery” an inadequate descriptor because “center-periphery” approaches tend to over-simplify the complexities of frontier politics. Cf., Andrew Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 3-17.

<sup>15</sup> James Scott et al, “The Production of Legal Identities Proper to States: The Case of the Permanent Family Surname,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002): 4-44.

multiple, yet relations of domination tend towards its singular, ideologically-inflected representation.<sup>16</sup> How we know a given space's dimensions, names, or cartographic location reflect inherently political—and contingent—outcomes in power-laden processes of spatial production. To recite one place name among others indicates the effects of one political project among others.

To describe a frontier uncritically risks accepting and reproducing the hegemony of one particular claim among others. Only by deconstructing the idea of “Northwest Vietnam” can we begin to understand how agreement on the transformation of borderland to frontier structured antithetical projects of imperial reconstruction and nation-state making. Only by demystifying the spatial representations of imperial and nation-state rule can we begin to understand how their projects came to be locally institutionalized and legitimized in an evolving spatio-temporal context. Describing how a frontier came to be and where it happens to be located, therefore, illuminates historic and ongoing processes of making and unmaking relations of rule.

### ***Early patterns of settlement and organization***

A history of the middle Black River basin begins with histories of spatially-organized dominations. Over a millennium ago, Thái migrants began to move south from China and into a borderland region of forested hills and high mountains intersected by narrow valleys and rushing rivers. These early migrants cleared and settled what little bottom land they could find and, over time, grouped their settlements according to a pattern befitting this rugged landscape. A cluster of villages (*bản*) formed a *muang*, a valley-based relation of spatial rule governed by a coterie of

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<sup>16</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 26-27.

Thái hereditary nobility, or lords (*châu*).<sup>17</sup> Peasants gained access to wet-rice land by laboring in service to lords who, in turn, held land in common. Should a lord's rule prove too exploitative, peasants could flee one *muang* for another. Or, they could avoid labor service by heading for the hills above the valleys. Unlike the sedentary fields of irrigated rice, hill residents practiced shifting cultivation by opening dry-field swiddens in the forest. They earned relative labor sovereignty by making payments to the lords in grains, cotton, opium, or forest products.<sup>18</sup> In folk narratives of this expansion and settlement, Mường Thanh, known today as Điện Biên Phủ, figures as a mythical point of origin for Thái-speakers now scattered across modern mainland Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup>

Over time, successive waves of migrants to this hill and valley terrain added to the population and diversified it according to elevation. In a pattern common to what James Scott and others have called “Zomia,” a shorthand for the Southeast Asian Massif or the eastern foothills of the Himalayas, these societies became stratified along an altitudinal gradient, associating cultural forms with topography and agricultural specialization.<sup>20</sup> In spite of its low population density relative to the downstream deltaic plains of major rivers like the Red or Mekong, most of the

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<sup>17</sup> Note that “*châu*” here refers to a Thái lord, based on a Thái language word. According to Romanized Vietnamese, it shares the same spelling with the Sino-Việt rootword for “mountain district” (roughly equivalent to the *muang* or “county”) paired administratively with “delta district” (*huyện*); it is this latter meaning that appears in place names such as Mộc Châu, Yên Châu, etc. Cf., Phan Văn Các, *Từ Điển từ Hán Việt* (Hô Chí Minh City: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2003), 76. For more on the *muang*, cf., John T. McAlister, “Mountain Minorities and The Viet Minh: A Key to The Indochina War,” in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, Nations*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 779; Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 49; Cầm Trọng, *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1978), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Cầm Trọng and Hữu Ứng, “Chế độ ruộng công và hình thái xã hội của người Thái Tây-Bắc trước đây,” *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 151 (1973), 56.

<sup>19</sup> David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2003), 9-10; Pierre Gourou, *Indochine Française: Le Tonkin* (Paris: Mâcon, 1931), 202.

<sup>20</sup> James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Jean Michaud, *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2006); Willem Van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002), 647-668.

region's topography was too steep to support wet-rice agriculture. Because the Thái had arrived first, according to what one scholar aptly describes as "historical relations of chronological priority," they controlled most irrigable bottom land.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, subsequent waves of migrants settled higher and higher on the slopes to open swiddens, cultivate grains and cash crops, raise livestock, and collect forest products. Among others, Khu Mu (or Tsa/Xá) settled the midlands in proximity to the Thái *muang*. Later on, groups of Hmong (or Miao/Mèo), many fleeing a failed rebellion against expanding Qing administration in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, settled the highest ridges and mountaintops.<sup>22</sup>

Even if relative newcomers occasionally challenged their rule, the Thái endured as acknowledged sovereigns of this particular domain. Indeed, the Black River region was beginning to exhibit distinctive forms of rule and enduring patterns of culturally-inflected settlement, trade, and agriculture. From approximately the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the *muang* lords formed a confederation known as the *Sipsongchauthai*, or "Twelve Thái Counties."<sup>23</sup> This confederation was centered loosely in Mường Lay, or modern Lai Châu, located where the Black is joined by the Nậm Na and Nậm Lai Rivers. The confederated *muang* spread across the high plateau south of China's Yunnan province between the Mekong and Red Rivers. In the three

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Proschan, "Peoples of the Gourd: Imagined Ethnicities in Highland Southeast Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 60 (2001), 1007. Cf., Gourou, *Indochine Française* (1931), 200.

<sup>22</sup> The multiple ethnonyms cited here, though by no means exhaustive, indicate the multiplicity and plasticity of identities among peoples for whom ethno-linguistic labels can be misleading. I retain these ethnonyms to approximate group origins and inter-group relations. For more on problems of naming, cf., Frank Proschan, "'We Are All Kmhmu, Just the Same': Ethnonyms, Ethnic Identities, and Ethnic Groups," *American Ethnologist* 24 (1997): 94-113; Edmund Leach, "The Frontiers of 'Burma,'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3 (1960): 49-68. For more on migration from China, cf., Jean Michaud, "From Southwest China into Upper Indochina: an overview of Hmong (Miao) Migrations," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 38 (1997): 119-130; Scott (2009); Giersch (2006).

<sup>23</sup> Scholars translate this term differently, a trend which returns to the problems of understanding *châu* as either a "lord" (in Thái) or "county" (in Sino-Vietnamese). The key term applies to the form of rule or ruler and, in turn, hinges on the translatability of the *muang* as "state," "county," "chiefdom," "principality," etc. Cf., "12 Thái States" in McAlister (1967), 779; "12 Thái Chiefdoms" in Thongchai (1994), 98; "12 Thái Lords" in Scott (2009), 36.



centuries prior to French contact, the *Sipsongchauthai* paid tribute to multiple overlords sited downstream, including the Qing dynasty, the courts of Luang Prabang and Vientiane, and the Nguyễn kings at Huế.<sup>24</sup> These overlord courts were, in turn, often caught up in their own complex tributary networks: for example, the Nguyễn court sent trade missions to China and the Lao courts to Siam. For the overlords, the forested uplands were a source of great wealth as producers of forest products and bonded labor.<sup>25</sup>

By underscoring the complexity and multiplicity of these claims to Black River territory, I speak to two different scholarly interpretations. First, nationalist historians in Vietnam hark back to Đại Nam's records to buttress a very contemporary territorial claim. By recalling that the Nguyễn kingdom's northern salient (*Bắc kỳ*) included the borderland province of Hưng Hoá, nationalist scholarship contributes to substantiating modern Vietnam's claim to, what is now, the nation-state's "Northwest" region. "In those days," writes Đỗ Thiện, "people referred to the [Black River] region as the 'Síp-song-châu-Thái' *one part* of Vietnam under Hưng Hoá."<sup>26</sup> Certainly, the Nguyễn court's registers included this Black River terrain as the province of Hưng Hoá. Yet imperial Huế did not send mandarins to the area and preferred, instead, to deal with local power-brokers such as the *Sipsong*'s Đèo clan.<sup>27</sup> In light of contemporary

<sup>24</sup> For perspectives from courts in Nguyễn Vietnam, cf., Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Siam, Wyatt (2003); Qing China, Giersch (2006).

<sup>25</sup> Oliver Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Ithaca: SEAP Publications, 1999), 161-162. That labor was a prerogative of statesmanship indicates how, for early Southeast Asia generally, control and concentration of manpower conferred control over land and territory. Cf., Scott (2009), ch 3. In addition to royal trade, a lively caravan trade linked Yunnan to montane communities and population centers in present Burma, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. Cf., Andrew D. Forbes, "The 'Cin-Ho' (Yunnanese Chinese) Caravan Trade with North Thailand during the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *Journal of Asian History* 21 (1987), 1-47.

<sup>26</sup> Đỗ-Thiện, "Một vài nét về lịch sử tỉnh Lai Châu (Khu tự trị Tây Bắc) chống thực dân Pháp đầu thế kỷ XX," *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 45 (Dec., 1962), 33. The added italics for "part" (*bộ phận*) signal language that echoed then President Hồ Chí Minh's 1955 statement, "The Thái Mèo Autonomous Zone *is one inextricable part of Vietnam's great family...*" Italics in original, "Thư gửi đồng bào Khu tự trị Thái-Mèo," *Bác Hồ với đồng bào các dân tộc* (Hanoi: NXB Thông tấn, 2006), 18.

<sup>27</sup> In 1831, King Minh-Mạng introduced a centralized administrative system based on the Chinese model within which Hưng Hoá was one of 31 provinces. Woodside (1991), 96-107, 120-121, 141-152;

scholarship, I interpret this evidence as akin to a regal fiat, or a one-way administrative claim. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century alone, *Sipsong* rulers also negotiated with rival court centers, such as an expansionist Siam, and contended with rival power-brokers, such as the Black and Yellow Flags who had immigrated from Canton and Yunnan in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup>

Thongchai Winichakul expresses the political relations exemplified by the *Sipsongchauthai* as a form of “multiple sovereignty.”<sup>29</sup> The idea of multiple sovereignty leads me, secondly, to respond to current revisionist interpretations of highland Southeast Asia’s history. James Scott cites the *Sipsongchauthai* as a classic example of what he calls a “hill state” characterized by unfixed borders and maintenance of tributary relations with larger, more populous “valley state” kingdoms.<sup>30</sup> His interpretation builds on Thongchai’s important work historicizing the polyvalence of early Southeast Asian forms of rule. Thongchai argues that the *Sipsongchauthai*, by strategically manipulating external alliances, was a “frontier tributary” that remained “more or less independent and neglected.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, situated at the margins of three or more principal political centers (Vietnamese, Chinese, Siamese), the confederation paid tribute to all and, in so doing, earned the right to manage its own manpower, land, and system of levies.

Although the idea of multiple sovereignty is analytically useful, to call the *Sipsongchauthai* a “frontier tributary” appears less so. To call this region a “frontier” prior to French colonial rule seems anachronistic because, as Thongchai explains,

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Nguyễn Thế Anh, “Établissement par le Viêt Nam de sa frontière dans les confins occidentaux,” in *Les Frontières du Vietnam*, ed. P.B. Lafont (Paris: Éditions Harmattan, 1989), 189-190.

<sup>28</sup> For a critical perspective drawing on archives in China, France, and Vietnam to demonstrate the multiple claims and contingent outcomes involved in Hung Hoá’s local rule cf., Bradley Davis, “States of Banditry: The Nguyen Government, Bandit Rule, and the Culture of Power in the post-Taiping China-Vietnam Borderlands” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> Thongchai, *Siam Mapped* (1994).

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), 36.

<sup>31</sup> Thongchai (1994), 95-101.

borders were malleable and had yet to be fixed. To call its manner of rule “tributary” only underlines how *Sipsong* rulers engaged in practices no different from competing overlords, all of whom engaged in unequal relations of trade-based recognition among one another and, ultimately, with the Chinese court.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, maintaining sovereignty was not limited to relations with or between large kingdoms, located *outside* the *Sipsong* domain. Relations of domination and trade recognition repeated, fractal-like, *within* the confederation’s own shifting territory, between the Thái and growing migrant populations, many of whom, as Scott observes, had fled an expanding, centralizing Chinese administration.<sup>33</sup>

Complicating ideas of Zomia as a refuge away from states, these new arrivals did not settle a non-state space. Rather, in Scott’s terms, they had to negotiate relations enmeshed in the “hill state” of the *Sipsongchauthai*. Groups of migrants who settled there acknowledged Thái sovereignty by developing complex relationships with *muang* lords—whether of subordination or autonomy, trade or tribute—to earn a place to live and farm.<sup>34</sup> At one extreme, Khu Mu people settled in proximity to the “dominant [social] element” of the Thái who, in turn, “oppressed them like half-serfs.”<sup>35</sup> At another extreme, Hmong people engaged in trading relations at arm’s length by producing opium and livestock in exchange for essential commodities: “If we could produce salt,” stated a Hmong informant, “we would have no need to descend to the plain.”<sup>36</sup> Although these more recent settlers often spoke multiple languages and practiced novel customs, they all entered into specific relationships—often tributary and sometimes rebellious—with the local Thái lords. The fluidity of movement in and around this region was paralleled by a flexibility of internal and

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<sup>32</sup> Cf., Davis (2008); Woodside (1988).

<sup>33</sup> Scott (2009), 129.

<sup>34</sup> McAlister (1967), 782.

<sup>35</sup> Gourou (1931), 236.

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Gourou, *L’Utilisation du Sol en Indochina—au Vietnam* (Paris: Hartmann, 1940), 349.

external forms of rule, of constantly renegotiated relationships of domination and subordination, resistance and compliance.

### ***Colonial transformations***

The Black River region originally became part of French empire through a series of complex contingencies stemming from imperial expansion, negotiating local rule, and managing historically embedded rivalries. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the Suez Canal and steam-power facilitated naval power and sea-borne commercial activity, western European nation-states scrambled to consolidate control over their respective colonies' hinterland regions. Eager to open trade routes through mainland Southeast Asia and gain access to China's "backdoor," Britain and France engaged in a fierce competition to secure territory and control riverine commerce. They avoided conflict among themselves by fixing colonial frontiers and mapping the borders between Burma, Siam, Indochina, and China.<sup>37</sup>

France assembled its colonial empire from territories claimed formerly by the Vietnamese monarchy in two distinct stages: first, in the south (1858-1867); then, in the center and north (1873-1885). After France claimed the southern reaches of Đại Nam, christening it the colony of Cochinchina, the French navy was poised to seize its northern portions. In 1873 at Hanoi's citadel, the Black Flags, mercenaries in employ of the Nguyễn, repulsed a French expedition.<sup>38</sup> A decade later, desperate for assistance when faced with another French expedition of renewed strength, the Nguyễn king Tự Đức drew on his tributary relationship and appealed for Chinese intervention to save the remnants of his kingdom. But by the end of the Sino-French war (1884-1885), China had renounced its ancient claim over its southern neighbor, ceding control to

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<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Tarling, "The Establishment of Colonial Regimes," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, ed. Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Cf., Brocheux and Heméry (2009).

<sup>38</sup> For more on the "Black Flags" and mercenary forces in colonial struggles, cf., Davis (2008).

France. Ambitious naval officers conquered Đại Nam's central and northern salients, christening them, in turn, the protectorates of Annam and Tonkin.<sup>39</sup>

French treaty-makers adopted Đại Nam's court registers to legitimate their colonial claim to territory. Among others, they claimed multiply contested territories, such as the Mekong Delta and the Black River borderlands.<sup>40</sup> It was in the colonial interest to recognize Đại Nam's claim to the province of Hưng Hoá, i.e. the Black River borderlands, and fold it into an emergent colonial domain predicated on exclusive territorial sovereignty. The colonial government elevated one claim above all others to justify its own.<sup>41</sup>

Enforcing territorial rule in the hinterlands required more effort, and negotiating with many more parties, than simply signing treaties in Đại Nam's imperial capital of Huế. Siam sent a military expedition to the Black River territory in 1885, ostensibly to defend its Lao tributary from depredations by the Black Flag bands. Ranging as far as the *Sipsong* domain and even conquering Mường Thanh (aka, Điện Biên Phủ), the expedition aggrandized both Đèo Văn Tri as well as the territory's rising colonial claimant. Đèo Văn Tri retaliated in 1887 by razing the city of Luang Prabang, a vassal of Siam as well as the rival, and sometimes overlord, of the *Sipsong*.<sup>42</sup> What remained for the French was to secure the frontier and delineate its borders, two tasks that cemented Đèo Văn Tri's place in the new colonial order.

French colonial rule expanded into the montane borderlands in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Brocheux and Heméry (2009), 42-44. Cf., Henry McAleavy, *Black Flags in Vietnam* (New York: MacMillan, 1968).

<sup>40</sup> For more on the Mekong delta and contests between Siam and Đại Nam over Khmer territory, cf., Woodside (1991), 249-256; Nicholas Tarling, *Imperialism in Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 121-131; Pierre-Lucien Lamant, "La frontière entre le Cambodge et le Vietnam du milieu du XIXe siècle à nos jours," in Lafont, ed. (1989).

<sup>41</sup> Again, nationalist scholarship reproduces the singularity of this historical claim to justify contemporary Vietnamese claims to contested territory and, effectively, writes any competing claims out of the historical record. Cf., Vũ Văn Tỉnh, "Những thay đổi về địa lý hành chính các tỉnh Bắc-kỳ trong thời kỳ Pháp thuộc," *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 133 (1970a), 43.

<sup>42</sup> Philippe Le Failler, *La Rivière Noire: L'Histoire d'une Marche Frontière* (March, 2010a, draft manuscript), 49.

century through diplomatic maneuvering, threatened force, and armed conquest. Auguste Pavie featured prominently in this drama as an explorer, diplomat, and map-maker. Capping a series of events that grew out of Siam's "invasion" of Laos and Tonkin in 1885, Pavie prevailed on Siam in 1888 to relinquish its claim to the *Sipsongchauthai*. During the Franco-Siamese crisis in 1893, after French gunboats sailed up the Chao Phraya River towards Bangkok, Pavie secured a favorable agreement with the Siamese kingdom to relinquish its claim to Laos and cede it to France.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, French military forces conquered and suppressed—or, euphemistically, “pacified”—any armed resistance in Tonkin and its highland regions, including a royalist restoration movement (*Cần Vương*).<sup>44</sup> Together, these diplomatic negotiations and military excursions cleared a path for Pavie's scientific expeditions to map, fix, and delineate boundaries in borderlands spreading from the upper Mekong basin eastwards across the Black River and to the Red River valley.<sup>45</sup> If Pavie's expeditions established the modern borders between units of French Indochina (i.e., Laos and Tonkin) and between China, Siam, and British colonial Burma, then local assistance and negotiation simultaneously enabled his efforts and determined the form of colonial rule there.

Đèo Văn Trì developed a fortuitous, mutually beneficial relationship with Pavie. Aware that his former Burmese, Chinese, Lao, and Siamese overlords had all been subdued by French and British imperial force, he transformed himself from an early opponent of French rule to become an enabler and a beneficiary. By the late 1880s, as the royalist movement lost ground to the French military in the Red River

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<sup>43</sup> Wyatt (2003), 186-190; Thongchai (1994), 98-100, 109-112; Martin Stuart-Fox, “Conflicting Interpretations of the State: Siam, France and Vietnam in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 82 (1994), 140.

<sup>44</sup> Tarling (2001), 182; Brocheux and Heméry (2009), 51-64.

<sup>45</sup> Auguste Pavie, *Pavie Mission Exploration Work*, trans. Walter E. J. Tipps, vol 1 (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 1999a).

Delta, the French turned their attention to the highlands.<sup>46</sup> When Colonel Pernot marched a column into Lai Châu in February 1888, he reported to Pavie that the town lay in ruins, torched at the behest of a fugitive regent and leader of the royalist restoration to whom Đèo Văn Tri had offered asylum.<sup>47</sup> Around this time, Đèo Văn Tri evidently decided his interests lay with rapprochement.

In 1890, the Đèo lord offered his loyalty and services to France at Mường Thanh, now known as Điện Biên Phủ, through a symbolically-rich ceremony. He presented Auguste Pavie with an ancient golden seal (retrieved during his sack of Luang Prabang in 1887) bestowed by Chinese kings to the sovereigns of the Lao hinterlands. Weighing almost 6 kg and measuring 11.5 cm<sup>2</sup> at its base, it features a camel kneeling to receive its load. This seal, wrote Pavie, “constitutes a document establishing the vassalage of this country to China, the rights of which have become ours.” With his family in audience, Đèo Văn Tri took a vow before an altar to his ancestors and declared, “We will be loyal to the French like we have been loyal to the kings of Annam.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, Đèo Văn Tri accepted French domination in exchange for continued leadership and control over the *Sipsongchauthai*.<sup>49</sup>

In 1893, with the approval of the Governor General, the clan-leader and borderlands power-broker became an official representative of the French Republic, earning the title of Frontier Lord (*Quản đạo* or, *chef de marche frontière*).<sup>50</sup> In 1894 Đèo Văn Tri assisted Pavie with delineating Indochina’s borderlines with China and cemented himself as the semi-autonomous sovereign of the Black River region.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism* (1971): 71-72.

<sup>47</sup> Pavie (1999a), 256-262. For more on the Regent Tôn Thất Thuyết, cf., Le Failler (2010a).

<sup>48</sup> By “An Nam” Đèo Văn Tri referred to the old Chinese name for “The Pacified South,” or present Vietnam; Annam was also the central region of (Vietnamese) Indochina. Pavie (1999a), 367-369.

<sup>49</sup> Pavie wrote in 1891, “The leadership of Deo Van Tri, an intelligent man and superior to his compatriots... showed us not only that he took it to heart to prove that we can count on him but he also insisted on earning our gratitude” (1999a), 467.

<sup>50</sup> This is my English translation of *Quản đạo*. Le Failler opts for “Marcher Lord” (2010a), 107.

<sup>51</sup> For contemporary analyses of the processes involved in demarcating the Lao/Tonkin and Sino/Tonkin borders, cf., Le Failler (2010a), 109-110; Davis (2008), 287-301.

Maps and treaties resulting from these expeditions and negotiations formed the legal basis for French claims to the outer reaches of colonial territory.<sup>52</sup> Out of these contingent and negotiated processes of claim-making and boundary delimitation, the *Sipsongchauthai* became a part of Tonkin and Indochina emerged as a colony of France.

If exclusive territorial sovereignty and fixed borders replaced multiple sovereignty and fluid borders, then this process produced a frontier territory under nominal imperial rule. By recognizing the Đèo claim to the historic *Sipsong* domain, colonial officers and officials elevated one among other Thái subgroups as rightful local rulers. By folding Đại Nam's claim to this territory into the colonial domain, they positioned the French empire as the region's singular, ultimate overlord.

From a longer perspective, the *Sipsongchauthai* was never foreordained to become part of the French empire, never mind Vietnam. Compared with the Đại Nam's court center in Huế, local Thái lords had more in common culturally and linguistically with Ayutthaya and Bangkok, more in common historically and geographically with Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Examining an early history of multiple sovereignty and its trajectory towards a singular form demonstrates the mutual negotiations and accommodations, violence and contest, uncertainty and contingency with which this region came to be part of empire. Only after similar processes, contests, and uncertainties did this corner of French empire become part of Vietnamese nation-state.

For the next half century, French Indochina administered the former *Sipsongchauthai* and neighboring regions as "military territories" under the dual oversight of military and civil authorities. Colonial officials subdivided all of montane

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<sup>52</sup> Stuart-Fox (1994), 140.



northern Tonkin and Laos, i.e. Indochina's frontier with China, according to five military territories: the 4<sup>th</sup> was located in Lai Châu (*IV<sup>e</sup> Territoire Militaire*), sandwiched between the 5<sup>th</sup> in Phong Saly, Laos, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> in Hà Giang, Tonkin. In contrast to civil administration, French administrators justified supplementary military oversight in the highland frontier with China as necessary for suppressing “piracy” (*piraterie*).<sup>53</sup> In so doing, they echoed both a Vietnamese notion of “piracy” (*giặc*) which, according to the mandarin tradition, functioned to delegitimize rebellion and according to the French Republican tradition, worked to legitimize repression in terms of a pacifying and civilizing colonization.<sup>54</sup>

Tonkin's form of “mixed administration,” or indirect rule, exemplified by the special relationship with the Đèo clan, fulfilled two broad goals of colonial administrators.<sup>55</sup> First, cultivating relationships with select “native” or “local” (*indigène*) rulers figured in an evolving strategy of suppressing opposition to colonial rule by building boundaries between, and separating spaces according to, “ethnic” or “racial” difference.<sup>56</sup> Second, the establishment of military territories along the frontier with China formed a protective ring around the core area of the Red River delta.<sup>57</sup> In particular, the colonial relationship with Đèo Văn Trì enabled Indochina's administrators to establish indirect rule; to map and fix the borders of Laos, Tonkin, and China; and to consolidate a claim to territory along China's frontier.

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<sup>53</sup> Lévi (1931), 30-32.

<sup>54</sup> Brocheux and Heméry (2009), 51. For critical perspectives on “banditry” and “piracy” here at this time, cf., Davis (2008). For regional perspectives, see Eric Tagliacozzo, *Secret Trades, Porous Borders* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) and James Warren, *The Sulu Zone* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 1981).

<sup>55</sup> J.S. Furnivall argued that direct rule imposed a novel political structure rather than ruling indirectly through an administration already in place. *Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 1956). Cf., Carl Trocki, “Political Structures in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries,” pp. 75-126 in Tarling, ed. (1999).

<sup>56</sup> Jean Michaud, “The Montagnards and the State in Northern Vietnam from 1802 to 1975: A Historical Overview,” *Ethnohistory* 47 (2000), 344; Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 277-278.

<sup>57</sup> Le Failler (2010a).

For Đèo Văn Trì, the relationship provided him a measure of autonomy, French protection in a rough neighborhood, and military assistance against local revolts. By cooperating with French diplomats, map-makers, officers, and officials to extend colonial rule into this hinterland, he reduced the number of threats to the confederated *muang* domain and enabled his clan to retain privileged positions of local rule.<sup>58</sup> Đèo Văn Trì secured continued leadership of the historic *Sipsongchauthai* albeit in a different form—as Frontier Lord in the Fourth Military Territory. By gaining a coveted position as an official colonial representative, Đèo Văn Trì cleverly formalized his—and his family’s—rule in modern guise.<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, Đèo Văn Trì capitalized on the privileges of being a Frontier Lord and a self-styled guardian of the Chinese border. He emerged as a cosmopolitan political figure who lavishly entertained officials, journalists, and other curious travelers at his palatial home in Lai Châu.<sup>60</sup> He also proved adept at manipulating the colonial administration to his advantage. With the encouragement of Pavie, he sent his sons and nephews to attend the Colonial School in France where they studied, among other subjects, French administrative procedures and law.<sup>61</sup> Đèo Văn Trì transformed local tributary relations into a revenue system by collecting and enforcing colonial taxes and monopolies. He and his family became rich through (il)licit trading activities, both by expanding riverine trade in tea, salt, and opium upstream into China and by smuggling

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<sup>58</sup> Le Failler, “The Deo Family of Lai Châu” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, Philadelphia, PA, March 2010b), 9.

<sup>59</sup> According to colonial recognition of highland “mandarins” as colonial officials, the Frontier Lord enjoyed superior rank vis-a-vis White Thái *muang* lords (*tri châu*) in Phòng Thổ, Lai Châu, Quỳnh Nhai; and to Black Thái lords located in Sơn La, Thuận Châu, Điện Biên. Le Failler (2010), 107-108.

<sup>60</sup> Consistent with what Le Failler describes as a “campaign of self-promotion,” Đèo Văn Trì even published an autobiography in French (2010b), 7. Cf., Đèo Văn Trì, “Mémoires de Deo-Van-Tri,” recorded by A. Raquez and Cam, *Revue Indochinoise* 4 (1904), 256-275.

<sup>61</sup> Notwithstanding years of training, Le Failler notes that when the graduates returned to Tonkin, they lived in a system in which they figured as neither as fish nor fowl: they knew the administrative system but encountered discrimination from officials because of their “native” status. Still, they furnished the Frontier Lord with insider knowledge about how, for example, to exploit disparities between military and civilian bureaucracies and take advantage of inter-departmental rivalries (2010b), 7.

the same goods in contraband form. Whenever he encountered criticism from suspect French officials, Đèo Văn Trì pointed to his role defending the border and supporting expeditions to ward off Chinese incursions.

When Đèo Văn Trì died in 1908, his will named Auguste Pavie executor and—much to the chagrin of Indochina’s government—Pavie mobilized his contacts in Paris to secure for his first son, Đèo Văn Kháng, the right to succeed. The Governor General bowed to the Minister of Colonies’ wishes. Nonetheless, the colonial government initiated a long process of chipping away at the expression of local prerogatives by reforming the region’s territorial administration to conform with downstream Tonkin and the underlying organization of the Vietnamese monarchy.<sup>62</sup> For example, they subdivided the military territory into the provinces (*tỉnh*) of Sơn La and Lai Châu and restricted the Đèo clan’s formal power to the latter. The death of Đèo Văn Kháng in 1930 presented awaiting colonial authorities with “the occasion,” writes Philippe Le Failler, “to bring a decisive coup to the power of the Đèo clan.” No longer challenged by Pavie and other Đèo allies in Paris, managing the clan was now an affair internal to the Tonkin protectorate. Administrators both abolished the title of Frontier Lord (*Quản đạo*) and continued to restrict territory under Đèo clan officials. The colonial government also attempted to undercut the autonomous power of *muang* lords by repeatedly redrawing—and shrinking—their respective bailiwicks; by limiting their control over land allocation through privatization of wet-rice fields held in common; and by sending them to serve in other colonial regions.<sup>63</sup> The start of world war in 1939-40 and subsequent colonial reconstruction, however, would reverse these initiatives aimed to restrict local power.

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<sup>62</sup> Edmond Chabant, “Notes sur l’Histoire des Haut-Pays du Nord-Ouest Vietnam” (Lai Chau, 25 May 1951, typescript), 24-25.

<sup>63</sup> Summary treatment of the period between 1908-1940 draws on Le Failler (2010a, 2010b). On small steps to privatize land in 1937-38, cf., Cẩm Trọng (1978), 482.

### *Colonial knowledge and power*

Notwithstanding later administrative attempts to restrict its expression, institutionalizing Đèo clan power above other groups articulated with an ongoing imperial project to know, classify, and rule colonial subjects apportioned territorially. In Indochina and Tonkin, the colonial government and its military pursued a “politics of race” founded on, what a Committee on Colonial Defense called in 1910, “the old Latin precept: ‘*divide ut régnes*.’”<sup>64</sup> The strategy of “divide and rule,” explained the Committee, aimed to arm and empower one among other colonized societies—in particular, the “natives” of highland Tonkin—against a potential uprising by a more numerous, downstream social group.<sup>65</sup> Favorable treatment accorded to the White Thái in general and the Đèo clan in particular conforms to this policy.

“Divide and rule” policy unfolded in four concrete, over-lapping programs: military tactics, imprisonment, administrative divisioning, and knowledge production. Through these programs, I argue, colonial strategy aimed to regulate boundaries around highland and lowland regions together, constructing a boundary “external” to Indochina’s territories; and between and among highland social groups in relation to Kinh/Viet peoples, constructing boundaries “internal” to its territory of Tonkin, for example.<sup>66</sup> Although these colonial boundaries were unstable, and their effects

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<sup>64</sup> Comité Consultatif de la Défense des Colonies, “Étude sur la création de troupes cambodgiennes et de troupes de frontière recrutées parmi les populations autochtones du HAUT TONKIN,” 1910, NAVC 1, Fonds du Gouvernement Général de l’Indochine, file no. 2162, p. 2-3. For more on colonial “divide and rule” and revolutionary responses, see Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982), 275-280.

<sup>65</sup> As a military strategy of using “native” troops to defray costs and displace responsibility for violence, divide and rule was implemented throughout 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> French empire in Madagascar and North Africa as well. Cf., Douglas Porch, “Bugeaud, Galliéni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>66</sup> What I have called a boundary between lowland and upland peoples McAlister calls, “barriers to assimilation” (1967), 789. He does not recognize broader boundaries conditioning and regulating relations within Indochina (i.e., Laos vs. Tonkin) or separating it from Siam or China. Elsewhere in Indochinese Vietnam, efforts to separate highland from lowland figured in administering the Central Highlands, particularly by regulating Viet/Kinh in-migration. Cf., Georges Condominas, “Aspects of a

contradictory, they nonetheless structured later attempts by nationalist revolutionaries to incorporate the Black River region's population and territory.<sup>67</sup>

Self-consciously emulating the British experience in colonial India, the Committee on Colonial Defense argued for taking advantage of “hereditary hostility” among the “*thổ*” or “*indigène*,” i.e. residents of highland Tonkin, towards the “Annamite race,” i.e. Việt or Kinh peoples. They counted on the former to treat the latter as “an external enemy in case of insurrection.” The Committee credited General Galliéni with inaugurating a policy “to place at the head of different races chiefs tied by blood” in order to “procure a certain administrative autonomy and to resuscitate a certain idea of their nationality.”<sup>68</sup> It was this logic that informed the selection and elevation of the White Thái Đèo clan in Lai Châu to rule indirectly the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Territory. Further, the Committee on Colonial Defense recommended that “autonomous” battalions of “frontier infantry” be formed in each of Tonkin's military territories.<sup>69</sup> So-called “montagnard” troops from Tonkin's highlands, like Cambodians, were an exception to the rule limiting Indochina's “native armies” to only an “external” role; in addition to their defense of the frontier, the military territories' “Partisans” operated routinely in their home region.<sup>70</sup> By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the so-called Thái Battalions had emerged to share military responsibilities with French regular troops to fight against Việt Minh guerilla units and the People's Army of Vietnam.

French policy sought to cultivate and exploit “racial” or “ethnic” difference

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Minority Problem in Indochina,” *Pacific Affairs* 24 (1951); Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

<sup>67</sup> Patricia Pelley highlights the contradictions, noting that the colonial regime, by building roads and railroads on the one hand and constructing an elaborate ethnic taxonomy on the other, “lessened the *physical* distance between highland and lowland peoples and intensified the sense of *cultural* difference.” Italics in original. *Postcolonial Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 71-75.

<sup>68</sup> Comité Consultatif, “Étude sur...” 1910, Fonds du GGI, NAVC 1, file no. 2162, p. 2-3, 19-20

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27-29, 34-36.

<sup>70</sup> Lévi (1931), 28-34.

through practices of punishment and administrative subdivisionings. Just as colonial officials and military officers recruited one social group as soldiers to fight another, so too did a similarly divisive logic inform recruitment of prison guards and selection of punishment sites. In 1932, following an upsurge in anti-colonial uprisings, colonial administrators transformed the small penitentiary in Sơn La into a maximum security prison to house “exiled” Kinh/Viet dissidents and criminals where, they calculated, the likelihood for collusion between inmates and the local population would be reduced.<sup>71</sup> As “Tonkin’s most important detention center for political prisoners,” the Sơn La penitentiary housed, among others, Trường Chinh, born in the Red River delta province of Nam Định, who was jailed for seven years in the early 1930s.<sup>72</sup> The punitive logic worked in reverse as well. Cầm Văn Dung, member of a prominent Black Thái family and a former district chief of Mai Sơn (1930-33), was imprisoned not in his native Sơn La but far away in Hanoi’s notorious Central Prison (Hỏa Lò).<sup>73</sup> Like Trường Chinh, he would be heard from again.

Amidst frequent changes in local administrative divisions, administrators of colonial Tonkin produced one among many lasting ethnically-inflected territorial boundaries. In 1909, they created the province of Lai Châu from a portion of Sơn La province to reflect the distribution of, and demarcate the boundaries between, their respective “ethnic” populations—Black Thái in Sơn La and White Thái in Lai Châu. “From a political perspective,” noted Resident Superior of Tonkin Arthus de Miribel, this spatial partition allotted domains accounting for “old political hatreds” among

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<sup>71</sup> Pelley (2002), 72-73. For more on colonial imprisonment in Indochina, cf., Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>72</sup> Quote from Zinoman (2001), 62-63. Cf., Cầm Trọng (1978), 487-488.

<sup>73</sup> Why he was imprisoned remains an outstanding question. According to one on-line source, he was accused of complicity in poisoning Sơn La’s Resident (*Công sứ*), Xanh Pu-lốp. Cf., “65 năm ngày thăng thiên, độn thổ ở Hỏa Lò,” *bee.net.vn* (21 Mar 2010). Accessed online 16 Apr 2010. Hanoi’s Prison was repurposed to house captured US pilots including, among others, a young John McCain.

“hereditary chiefs” recognized as “mandarins” by the French administration.<sup>74</sup> In addition to managing *muang* rivalries between ethnicized ruling families by subordinating their rule to counties (*châu*) and prefectures (*phủ*), the establishment of provinces (*tỉnh*) represented a colonial attempt to reorganize territory according to imperial Vietnamese traditions of administration.<sup>75</sup> Years later, the DRV would frequently resort to the same administrative practice—the creation or dissolution of provinces, districts, communes—in an attempt to recoup central control. In both instances, for the myriad non-Thái groups in the region, the French colonial regime and its successor appeared to favor ethnically-identified *muang* elites and their followers. Such apparent favoritism engendered growing discontent and, even, discussed below, open rebellion.

For officers and administrators to practice divide and rule, they endeavored in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to construct categories to know subject peoples and facilitate this policy.<sup>76</sup> Colonel E. Digue’s *Les Montagnards du Tonkin*, with a preface by Auguste Pavie himself, exemplifies how knowledge production enabled and informed the expansion of colonial power.<sup>77</sup> To familiarize scholars, bureaucrats, and military officers with so-called “montagnards,” early French ethnologists systematized knowledge of these montane Others according to a primordialist understanding of race and ethnicity.<sup>78</sup> Tellingly, their authors, like Digue, frequently served dual roles as agents of militarized French expansion and as

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<sup>74</sup> Résident Supérieur au Tonkin Miribel à Monsieur l’Administrateur Resident de France, “Sur la création de la province de Lai-châu,” 10 Aug 1909, NAVC 1, Fonds du Résident Supérieur au Tonkin, file no. 81406. Cf., Le Failler (2010a), 171-181; Vũ Văn Tinh, “Những thay đổi về địa lý hành chính các tỉnh Bắc-kỳ trong thời kỳ Pháp thuộc,” *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 134 (Sept-Oct, 1970), 60-62.

<sup>75</sup> In other words, the *muang* became either a larger *châu* (county) or a smaller *phủ* (canton or prefecture) depending on area and population. Cf., McAlister (1967), 808-809.

<sup>76</sup> For comparative perspectives on colonial ethnology in administering North Africa, cf., Gary Wilder *The French Imperial Nation-State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 63-75; George Trumbull, *An Empire of Facts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> Colonel E. Digue, *Les Montagnards du Tonkin* (Paris: Librairie Maritime et Coloniale, 1908).

<sup>78</sup> If the “yellow race” distinguished Indochina’s colonial subjects from France, then “ethnicity” differentiated one colonized group from another.

reporters of the peoples they encountered and “pacified.”<sup>79</sup> Diguët, an officer in the Colonial Infantry, compared the territory he had conquered as “so different from the Red River delta,” and the peoples there as “entirely different from the Annamites.” Note how this comparison fits these inhabitants within a spatial frame of colonial Tonkin, i.e. not the Lao protectorate, much less China or Siam. Tonkin’s external delimitation was the first of multiple socially-produced boundaries; the second was internal to this colonial space—i.e., highland and lowland.

Within this conjured space of highland Tonkin, Diguët adopted local ethnonyms used to distinguish one group from another and assigned them a fixity and rank. In so doing, he contributed to making a third social boundary. In his words, he “enumerated and ordered” the many “ethnic” groups by forming a “*hierarchy* corresponding to the altitude of their habitat... and based on the degree of [their] civilization.”<sup>80</sup> Diguët judged the valley-dwelling White Thái better suited to office than their more numerous rivals, the Black Thái, both of whom were nonetheless superior to, or “more important than,” the mountain-dwelling “barbarian” Hmong and Dao.<sup>81</sup> In short, Diguët constructed a colonial frontier taxonomy—at the top of which rested the White Thái and, foremost among others, the Đèo clan. His assessment of local “civilizations” rests on, and reproduces, an idea of a singular, racially-specific (i.e., white Euro-American) form of superior social organization and degree of cultural attainment; he ranked all other forms of culture-bound attainment in reference to this

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<sup>79</sup> Diguët’s work was one of many militarized ethnological portrayals central to informing the early colonial project among these highland societies. Cf., Louis de Grandmaison, Capitaine au 131e d’Infanterie, *En Territoire Militaire* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1898); Le Commandant Lunet de Lajonquière, *Ethnographie des Territoires Militaires* (Hanoi: F.H. Schneider, 1901); Maurice Abadie, Lieutenant-Colonel d’Infanterie Coloniale, *Les Races du Haut-Tonkin* (Paris: Société Editions, 1924); G. Aymé, Chef de Bataillon d’Infanterie Coloniale, *Monographie de V<sup>e</sup> Territoire Militaire* (Hanoi: Imprimerie D’Extreme Orient, 1930). For a comparaison with North Africa, cf., George Trumbull, “‘Au Coin des Rues Diderot et Moïse’: Religious Politics and the Ethnography of Sufism in Colonial Algeria, 1871–1906,” *French Historical Studies* 30 (Summer, 2007): 451–483.

<sup>80</sup> Italics in original. Diguët (1908), 10–11.

<sup>81</sup> He omits the Khumu, although Gourou later described them as “primitive” and akin to “savage” (*Môi*) populations of the Central Highlands (1931), 236–237.



unstated norm.<sup>82</sup> Such colonial knowledge, I argue in later chapters, was confined neither to the colonial era nor to colonial scholars.<sup>83</sup> Later, powerful state-makers and allied scholars not only reproduced an external territorial frame justified as national community, i.e. the “Vietnamese” space of former Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina. They also structured knowledge and administration of “national ethnicities” according to an internal, ranked hierarchy similar to the colonial model, one based on settlement elevation, agricultural techniques, and alleged degree of cultural attainment.

By delegating office and domain based on ranked ethnological categories, French colonial rule imbued the categories themselves with power. Over half a century, the “politics of race” articulated with older patterns of self-identification, agriculture, and rule to reconstitute social difference as a basis for and justification of political and economic inequalities. True to its intent, colonial rule produced a social order riven with tensions. Among the *muang* lords, privileged White Thái families, such as the Đèo, maneuvered amongst themselves and with or against rival Black Thái factions for control of office and scarce wet-rice land. Poor Thái peasants gained access to irrigable land through *corvée*, a practice similar to pre-colonial forms of bonded labor.<sup>84</sup> Meanwhile, swidden cultivators, from groups such as the Hmong and Khumu, resented taxes levied on their bodies (*capitation*, or head tax) and cash crops, notably opium. From 1918-1922, a Hmong “messianic” revolt, known as the Batchai (or Bả Cháy) movement, spread across northwest Tonkin and into northeast Laos, an uprising originally targeting local Thái rulers and Chinese traders.<sup>85</sup> The French

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<sup>82</sup> Lucien Febvre, “*Civilisation: evolution of a word and a group of ideas*” (1973), 247.

<sup>83</sup> Years later, prominent French scholars subscribed to a similar dichotomy between upland and lowland peoples *within* the given colonial space of Tonkin. Notably, their naturalist explanations of these differences neglect to mention how colonial policies contributed to their social reproduction. Cf., Gourou, “Land Utilization in Upland Areas of Indochina,” in *The Development of Upland Areas in the Far East* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1951); Condominas (1951).

<sup>84</sup> Although control of land was diminished with respect to precolonial norms, *muang* lords nonetheless secured rights to exchange “official” wet-rice land for *corvée* labor. Cf., Cẩm Trọng (1978), 478-482.

<sup>85</sup> Cf., Christian Culas, *Le messianisme hmong aux XIXe et XXe siècles: La dynamique religieuse comme instrument politique*. Paris: CNRS, Fondation de la Maison des sciences de l’homme (2005).

colonial military intervened to crush the revolt, mounting one of the largest armed expeditions in Indochina up to that time.<sup>86</sup>

The Batchai rebellion both highlights tensions of colonial rule and points to the politics of representing colonial-era rebellions. What may have appeared to colonial authorities as antagonisms between ethnicities endowed with primordial attributes can, instead, be interpreted as a tax revolt, or an extreme form of everyday struggles over profoundly unequal access to institutional privileges and rights to agrarian resources.<sup>87</sup> What may appear to nationalist historians to be exemplary of “a tradition of resistance to foreign invaders” overlooks complex and evolving relationships between lords and overlords, or local rulers and colonial hegemons.<sup>88</sup> Even if one were to accept that Hmong rebels revolted against Thái rulers only as proxies of French overlords, then the fact remains that Đèo Văn Tri cleverly manipulated relations with such “foreign invaders” to enable him—and his successors—to rule locally in a domain not yet known as “Vietnam.”

### ***WWII and colonial reconstruction***

The Southeast Asian experience of World War II reinforces that the region’s history was and remains a world history. When the Japanese army and navy defeated all manner of European power with stunning speed and skill, they inspired a sense of pride among colonized subjects that a fellow “Asian” people could defeat a form of rule that had seemed intractable only a decade earlier.<sup>89</sup> Japanese invasions swept

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<sup>86</sup> Geoffrey Gunn, “Shamans and Rebels: The Batchai (Meo) Rebellion of Northern Laos and North-west Vietnam (1918-21),” *Journal of the Siam Society* 74 (1986), 107-121.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm, “Truyền thống chống xâm lăng của Điện Biên trong lịch sử,” *Nghiên cứu Lịch sử* 102 (Sept, 1967); Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm, *Điện Biên trong Lịch sử* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1979), 115-120.

<sup>89</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *Nations and States in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79-85.

aside British rule in Burma, Singapore, and Malaya; French rule in Indochina; Dutch rule in the Netherlands Indies; and American rule in the Philippines. David Marr's observation of an emergent Vietnam during WWII holds for other Japanese-occupied countries as well: "Vietnam had to be seen in regional and global context, not in isolation."<sup>90</sup> No less than five foreign powers—France, Japan, China, US, UK—were interested in the territory of "Vietnam" alone during WWII. Three of these global powers occupied and contested the Black River region.

The subsequent war for independence in Indochina indicates the determination of France to retake its colonial holdings and stifle nationalist movements. Or, looked at another way, mass-based and armed support for nationalism, socialism, and anti-colonialism indicated local determination to resist colonial domination and to institute independent governments. As the dawning Cold War altered the calculus of international relations, however, the bilateral pattern of metropole-colony relations was shattered. With anti-colonial movements otherwise under-equipped and outgunned, the engagement of rising Cold War powers—the US assisting France to rebuild at home and abroad; Soviet and Chinese support for the nascent DRV—proved decisive to the outcome of national liberation. In other words, "independence" was not achieved autonomously but, rather, with substantial foreign aid distributed along the ideological fault lines of the Cold War.

It is possible to read the Japanese invasion of Southeast Asia as a catalyst for nationalist self-determination, but this is only one interpretation. Among an aging generation, the war is remembered as a period of profound deprivation. In the Red River Delta, allied bombing of shipping routes and the devastation left by multiple typhoons led to wide-spread famine: an estimated one million people starved to death

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<sup>90</sup> Marr (1995), 4.

in 1944-45.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, Japan's impending defeat raised questions and stimulated debates among the allies about rebuilding postwar Europe, China's growing power and, moreover, the status of European colonies following the war. These discussions indicate that independence was never guaranteed and, as histories of post-WWII anti-colonial warfare demonstrate, still required a protracted struggle to decolonize Southeast Asia. This fact became stunningly clear in late September 1945 when the allies arrived, ostensibly, to disarm Japanese troops: British troops landed in Saigon and Chinese Nationalist (GMD) troops moved into Tonkin and, in both cases, marginalized the provisional DRV government and facilitated the return of French troops and colonial administrators.<sup>92</sup>

During and immediately after the war, French domestic political leaders, supported by peers in Britain and Holland, argued for the restoration of colonial holdings, including Indochina, in order to rehabilitate and secure Western Europe.<sup>93</sup> It was an age of new imperialism. At Brazzaville in January 1944, Charles de Gaulle had ruled out the possibility of colonial autonomy and development "outside the French Empire." Instead, he articulated a vision for the Indochinese Federation to remain within the French Union, centered in Paris.<sup>94</sup> Colonial administrators were anxious to reclaim Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina—the same territories that Ho Chi Minh had declared on September 2, 1945 to constitute an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam. At first, the two parties attempted to negotiate but, by late 1946, they turned instead to confrontation. Based in the mountains north of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh worked

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<sup>91</sup> Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Before the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 130-133; Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982), 299-302.

<sup>92</sup> Marr (1995).

<sup>93</sup> Martin Thomas observes in post-WWII France what he calls, "the consolidation of an unprecedented imperialist consensus in French domestic politics." "French Imperial Reconstruction and the Development of the Indochina War," in Lawrence and Logevall, eds. (2007), 130.

<sup>94</sup> A.J. Stockwell, "Southeast Asia in War and Peace: the End of European Colonial Empires," Tarling, ed. (1999), 17. For more on Brazzaville, cf., Marr (1995), 328-336.

with the Viet Minh Front and the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) to gain control over spontaneous demonstrations of anti-colonialism, to channel them into a unified, nationalist movement to make a DRV state.<sup>95</sup> As counter, French officials worked to restore power by assembling a coalition of collaborators and isolating their nationalist opponents.

Shortly after the Japanese Imperial Army's surrender in August 1945, Chinese Nationalist forces spread through Tonkin to disarm them. For the people of Tonkin's northwest, the most pressing issue at the end of World War II was how to rid the region of Chinese troops who looted Japanese armories and "robbed the countryside bare."<sup>96</sup> Members of the region's ruling elite sought French assistance both to repatriate Chinese forces and to squelch any revolutionary resistance to their continued rule. In 1940, Đèo Văn Long had left his post as district chief (*Tri châu*) of Điện Biên Phủ to wait out the war in China with French exiles.<sup>97</sup> After the war, in February 1946, the second son of Đèo Văn Trì accompanied returning French military forces and asserted his position in Lai Châu as a ruling clan-leader and official of French Indochina. After a tense standoff in spring 1946 at Điện Biên Phủ between Chinese forces and a mixed column of French and Thái soldiers, the GMD troops began to return northwards; the last units did not depart until September.<sup>98</sup>

For the moment, select Thái lords and French colonial officials endeavored to renew their claims to this frontier territory. In 1948, the colonial government reaffirmed its relationship with the Đèo clan by recognizing Đèo Văn Long president

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<sup>95</sup> Marr (1995), 6. For a more conventional narrative granting linearity and direction to an already given and centralized "Viet Minh" leadership, cf., Stockwell in Tarling, ed. (1999), 30-32.

<sup>96</sup> Bernard B. Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967), 23.

<sup>97</sup> Chabant (1951), 47-49.

<sup>98</sup> Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm (1979), 133; Le Failler (2010a), 266-267; Cầm Trọng (1978), 522-534.

of the newly created Thái Federation. For architects of new French empire, this collaboration re-established indirect rule in a strategic frontier. For the leader of the Thái Federation, capitalizing on French political assistance and military aid enabled him to reassert a claim to rule the historic domain of his ancestors, the *Sipsongchauthai*. Their alliance recreated a semi-autonomous political unit within a corner of French empire. In so doing, their relationship reproduced the approximate spatial and social boundaries of a frontier territory.

If, over the next decade, the uplands of northwest Tonkin gradually assumed greater importance in the anti-colonial struggle, at this conjuncture it more closely resembled a backwater. The return of the colonial alliance scattered bands of the Viet Minh Front and reestablished a localized form of colonial rule. The nationalist revolutionary movement had few adherents among local people, except for a few youths and, notably, the former official and clan-leader, Cầm Văn Dung, who led a brief revolt in Sơn La.

And so this story begins in a land of competing claims to its territory. The setting was west of the Red River and east of the Mekong, in sharply rising mountains bisected by the Black River, where rugged topography structured socially-produced relations between lowlands and uplands, competing centers and a re-emergent frontier. It was this peopled terrain that, simultaneously, became focus both of colonial designs to circumscribe it, to rule the mountain region separately within Tonkin; and of revolutionary designs to transcend it, to integrate the region into a rising national state.

### ***The Thái Federation***

During the early years of the First Indochina War (1946-54), an alliance between Thái leaders and architects of new French empire reproduced an ethnicized, semi-feudal form of rule in Tonkin's northwest corner. On 15 July 1948 the French

reaffirmed their special relationship with Đèo Văn Long by creating the Thái Federation and recognizing him as its president.<sup>99</sup> Initially, the Thái Federation was attached formally to the French Union. In 1949, the Federation became part of the ostensibly independent Associated States of Vietnam led by former emperor Bảo Đại.<sup>100</sup> Over its six year life the Federation's degree of autonomy remained largely unchanged, that is, circumscribed and negotiated *within* French empire. The Federation's boundaries followed those mapped by colonial explorer Auguste Pavie in collaboration with Đèo Văn Trì in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. French advisors managed the Federation's finances and reported to superiors in Hanoi.<sup>101</sup> Federation leaders remained dependent on French military support to fend off a rising nationalist challenge to their territorial control.

Within the Associated States of Vietnam, the Thái Federation was one of several ethnicized units collectively referred to as the Montagnard Countries of the North (*Pays Montagnard du Nord*).<sup>102</sup> In the Central Highlands, another site of ethno-linguistic heterogeneity, lay the Montagnard Countries of the South.<sup>103</sup> Militarily, the Federation fit within the French Expeditionary Force's Northwest Autonomous Zone (*Zone Autonome Nord-Ouest* or, ZANO) whose primary mission was to protect the Thái Federation.<sup>104</sup> Based to the northwest of Indochina's capital of Hanoi, ZANO's personnel reflected the composition of France's larger colonial empire, with soldiers recruited locally and from as far away as Morocco.<sup>105</sup> The Federation itself

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<sup>99</sup> The Thái Federation was known in French as "La Fédération Tai" and in Vietnamese as the *Xứ Thái tự trị* or, literally, the Thái Autonomous Zone.

<sup>100</sup> For a diplomatic perspective known as the "Bao Dai solution" among American policy-makers, see Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 179-189.

<sup>101</sup> The advisors were known to DRV and Viet Minh. Cf., Sa Văn Minh, "Bảo cáo năm 1948 của UBKCHC Sơn-Lai," 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 14.

<sup>102</sup> For example, another zone recognized Nùng autonomy (*Xứ Nùng tự trị*).

<sup>103</sup> René de Berval, "Avant-propos" in Colonel Henri Roux and Tran-Van-Chu, "Quelques Minorités Ethniques du Nord-Indochine," *France Asie* 92-93 (1954), 135-136.

<sup>104</sup> McAlister (1967), 804-05.

<sup>105</sup> Cao Văn Lượng et al, *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân khu Tây Bắc (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 2003), 196.

commanded three battalions recruited from the region's own Thái peoples, i.e. the Thái Battalions. These roughly 2500 soldiers and officers were charged with protecting political infrastructure which, in practice, meant quelling popular unrest, collecting taxes, and countering a growing guerilla insurgency.<sup>106</sup>

As President of the Thái Federation, Đèo Văn Long drew on modern symbols to reassert what he considered his patrimony, to rule over the domain of the historic *Sipsongchauthai*. Like its pre-colonial predecessor, the seat of Federation authority was located in the town of Lai Châu. The Federation included three provinces (Sơn La, Phong Thổ, Lai Châu) and one special zone (Nghĩa Lộ) subdivided into 16 counties (*châu*).<sup>107</sup> Administratively, in keeping with traditions of colonially-recognized local rule, these districts drew on the historic shape and authority vested in the *muang*. A former colonial civil servant explained, “The *châu* was commanded by a *châu muang*, a member of the most influential local family.”<sup>108</sup> Each county chief (or, *châu muang*) enjoyed broad latitude in organizing his own bailiwick, subdivided according to communes and villages. Through his leadership of this hybrid structure, Đèo Văn Long regained for himself and his allies privileged positions atop a colonially-supported, ethnically-inflected administrative hierarchy.

Although the Thái Federation's administrative hierarchy recognized Thái units and leaders above others, the frontier remained a plural society. From 1950-1954, Jean Jerusalemy was the Thái Federation's assistant civil administrator. His 1953 title, “Monograph on the Thái Country,” provides invaluable insight into, among other topics, the frontier's demographic composition.<sup>109</sup> He estimated the Federation's total population at approximately 260,000 inhabitants (see Table 1.1), identifying the most

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<sup>106</sup> Đặng Nghiêm Vạn and Đinh Xuân Lâm (1979): 133-134.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Jerusalemy (1953), 67.

<sup>109</sup> Biographical details on Jean Jerusalemy are from LeFailler (2010a), 332.



numerous residents as Black Thái (100,000), followed by Hmong (50,000), and White Thái (35,000).

Table 1.1: Population estimate of Thái Federation in early 1950s.<sup>110</sup>

Settlement type	Social group	Number of inhabitants
plains	Xa [Khumu]	15,000
	White Thái	35,000
	Black Thái	100,000
	Lu	6,000
	Lao	8,000
	Nhang [Nyang]	20,000
	Tho	8,000
	plains subtotal:	192,000
mountains	Koui Tchou	1,000
	Meo [Hmong]	13,000
	Man [Dao]	50,000
	various	2,000
	mtn subtotal:	66,000
town	Chinese	4,700
	town subtotal:	4,700
population total:		262,700

Although his estimates most likely do not account for all inhabitants (nor for their self-described social groupings), Jerusalem's data provides a unique snapshot of this frontier in the neo-colonial period. Several features are worth noting. First, notwithstanding what he calls a "superiority complex" among the White Thái, they composed only 13% of the population compared with more numerous Black Thái (38%) and Hmong (19%) inhabitants. Yet it was the White Thái who, with French colonial support, enjoyed what he called a "spirit of domination" in relation to all other groups, particularly their Black Thái rivals.

In contrast to Diguet's lumpen label of "montagnard," Jerusalem

<sup>110</sup> Jerusalem (1953), 18-21.

acknowledged local conceptions of identity and geography by disaggregating population figures according to settlement type. His categories of “plains” and “mountains” correspond roughly to the agroecological niches of irrigated and swidden agricultures.<sup>111</sup> Irrigated rice cultivation was organized on the *muang*-based principles of land and labor management. In general, wet-rice affords greater harvest returns per unit of land, allowing for more densely-settled, agriculturally-intensive populations. Shifting cultivation rewards returns per unit labor, favoring more scattered, agriculturally-extensive populations.<sup>112</sup> In addition to fitting with the hills’ demographic pattern of low population density, shifting cultivation afforded a degree of autonomy in relation to the *muang*-based control of land and labor.<sup>113</sup> Swidden agriculturalists participated in the rural market economy by growing cash crops and engaging in town-based relations of trade. Foremost among other swidden growers and products were the Hmong, whom Jerusalem called “large producers of opium.”

The so-called Chinese who lived in the towns of Sơn La, Lai Châu, Điện Biên, and Nghĩa Lộ worked mainly as brokers and merchants. Not only did they mediate between the two local forms of settlement and agricultural production, they also acted as nodes in larger exchange relations both between upstream and downstream, i.e. between the Thái Federation and the Red River Delta, and between Tonkin, China, and Laos. Jerusalem traced these Chinese settlers to remnants of “pirate” bands, or the Black and Yellow Flags.<sup>114</sup> Perhaps because their numbers were so small, Jerusalem did not report any population of Kinh/Viet residents. Evidently, except for a few junior officials working in colonial administration and traders working alongside Chinese migrants, the Kinh/Viet population was negligible. Overall, Jerusalem

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<sup>111</sup> Leach (1960).

<sup>112</sup> Cf., Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

<sup>113</sup> Scott (2009).

<sup>114</sup> Jerusalem (1953), 21.

reported a population density of 15-20 people per square kilometer.<sup>115</sup>

Notwithstanding his geographic distinction between hills, plains, and towns, Jerusalemy nonetheless reproduced an influential means of categorizing the population. He conflated complex, socially-produced identities with natural, unchanging communities. For the colonial civil servant, there were “Black Thái” and “White Thái” or “Chinese,” “Mèo [Hmong]” and “Xá [Khumu]” living here whose social identities were a given fact. For him, the boundaries of community were neither malleable, multiple, nor dialectically-generated. Rather, he ascribed these communal categories, or ethnonyms, in a one-way exercise of knowledge and power. Although he does not use the term “ethnicity,” his deployment of given ethnonyms conform to this colonially-produced category. It was a pattern later copied by post-colonial demographers who, by reporting results according to “ethnicity,” continued to imbue this social category with lasting and profound political valence.

The establishment of the Thái Federation continued a colonial tradition of ruling areas of “ethnic minorities” separately by empowering ethnically-identified elites to rule locally. Contests over Federation offices alternately united or divided elite Thái factions. Đèo Văn Long attempted to consolidate his leadership position in the Federation by manipulating alliances predicated on family ties and ethnicized forms of identification. Unintentionally, such political maneuvering rebounded in support for his avowed enemy, i.e. the rising anti-colonial opposition. Among the White Thái, he placated his main rival in Phong Thổ by awarding Đèo Văn An the position of Province Chief (*Tri phủ*). Among the Black Thái, the results were mixed. In Điện Biên Phủ, Đèo Văn Long replaced the district chief (*chánh tổng*), Lò Văn Hặc, with one of his own sons, Đèo Văn Ún, in 1946. Outraged, the ousted chief

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.

joined the resistance and, in turn, the younger Đèo imprisoned Lò's wife, confiscated his property, and burned his house.<sup>116</sup> Nursing his antipathy for the Đèo family, Lò Văn Hặc turned to the Viet Minh United Front and, later, emerged as one of its most influential local leaders.

To the south in Sơn La, the traditional seat of Black Thái communal power, Đèo Văn Long deployed his battalions in 1946-47 to quell an uprising led by supporters of the Viet Minh Front against French and Đèo clan rule. Then the Federation's President chose among five rival Black Thái families—each from different *muang*—to appoint Bạc Cầm Quý (of Thuận Châu) Sơn La's Province Chief (*Tri phủ*). Bạc Cầm Quý nursed a personal vendetta towards the Viet Minh whose affiliates had assassinated his brother in 1946 and another sibling by 1948.<sup>117</sup> The families passed over in this selection joined the vanquished leader of Sơn La's revolt, Cầm Văn Dung.<sup>118</sup> Prior to World War II, while imprisoned in Hanoi Central Prison, Cầm Văn Dung had befriended members of the Indochinese Communist Party and, evidently, had learned how to organize accordingly.<sup>119</sup> By 1948, the Thái Federation sponsored a bounty of 25,000 piasters on his head.<sup>120</sup> Xa Văn Minh of Mộc Châu (and its former colonial official, or *bố chánh*), Chairman of the Sơn-Lai Inter-Provincial Committee, led the DRV administrative body charged with galvanizing such discontent with the Federation into an oppositional movement.

By now, the earlier “divide and rule” policy regulating relations between upland “montagnard” peoples and lowland “Annamites” in Tonkin began to manifest

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<sup>116</sup> Le Failler (2010a), 278; Fall (1967), 24; Lê Tuấn, *Lịch sử Công an Nhân dân huyện Điện Biên (1952-1975)* (Hanoi: NXB Công an Nhân dân, 1994), 11-12.

<sup>117</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo 3 tháng 1,2,3 năm 1949 của UBNDHC Liên-tỉnh Sơn-La Lai Châu,” phòng PTTg (1945-54), NAVC 3, file no.187, p. 23.

<sup>118</sup> McAlister, “Mountain Minorities and The Viet Minh” (1967), 811; Cầm Trọng, *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc Việt Nam* (1978), 523-534.

<sup>119</sup> Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La, *Sơn La: Lịch sử Kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1995), 47; Marr (1995), 421; Zinoman (2001).

<sup>120</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, phòng PTTg (1945-54), NAVC 3, file no. 78, p. 26.

two unintended consequences. First, if French colonial policy “rigidified the ethnic boundaries” in “Vietnam” as a whole, then it also contributed to tensions within the plural society particular to these historic borderlands, i.e. between the “ethnic minorities” themselves.<sup>121</sup> By acknowledging the Đèo as legitimate rulers of this region—and protecting them militarily—the French colonial government reproduced bitter tensions not only within the White Thái, i.e., between powerful families. Joint colonial and Federation rule also reproduced antagonisms between the White Thái and Black Thái, as well as between Thái peoples generally and various other groups. Many Hmong cultivators, for example, chafed at continued Thái control over the trade of their most valuable cash crop, opium. These tensions were endemic to the restoration of colonial rule and the contested claims it inspired. Such tensions also led to the second unintended consequence of colonial “divide and rule.” If this policy had originally attempted “to transform the ethnic minorities into hostile communal barriers” between lowland Kinh/Viet people and potential Chinese assistance, then the splits reproduced under Thái Federation rule now motivated local oppositional figures to seek alternatives among the rising Viet Minh Front.<sup>122</sup> A rising coalition of Viet Minh organizers, ICP members, and DRV cadres, in turn, sought to use the Sino-Viet-Lao frontier to establish a base area through which they could funnel Chinese military assistance.

### ***A Contested Economy and the Politics of Opium***

If the Federation’s ethnicized and familial politics alienated many among the Thái elite, then a suite of its social policies—including taxation, state monopolies,

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<sup>121</sup> Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982), 277-278. Although it remains invaluable, this work takes “Vietnam” for granted, treats relations between the Viet Minh and “ethnic minorities” as unproblematic, and fails to differentiate among “ethnic minorities” themselves.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

resettlement, and land tenure—contributed to growing disaffection among the common folk. Formal and informal tax requirements were onerous. Local implementation of the “head tax” (*capitation* or *thuế thân*) mandated payments in both rice and cash, the latter levied at 10 piasters per registered adult.<sup>123</sup> In 1951, for example, a Khumu family in the village of Huổi Hoa (District of Tuần Giáo, Sơn La Province) reported an annual tax burden of 200 kg rice, 50 kg pork, 10 piasters, and 3 tael (114 g) opium; because they could not afford to pay the head tax directly, wealthier families took their livestock in exchange.<sup>124</sup> In addition, resident soldiers and officers compelled families living near ubiquitous military posts to supply them with food and grain.<sup>125</sup> Trade in salt was subject to a state monopoly and its sale in Indochina was taxed accordingly. Salt in this region, like farm tools and medicine, was in chronically short supply.<sup>126</sup> In areas threatened with insurgency, Thái battalions and French colonial soldiers forcibly moved residents from their natal villages and relocated them in concentrated settlements (*gros villages*).<sup>127</sup> Jerusalem explained the “withdrawal” of Thái, Hmong, and Dao settlements from throughout the region to these “large villages” as a means of making them “more easily controllable.”<sup>128</sup>

Resettlement weighed particularly heavily on swidden agriculturalists who had to

<sup>123</sup> Jerusalem, (1953), 80; Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), NAVC 3, file no. 78, p. 16. For more on the head tax, see Ngô Vĩnh Long (1991), 62-74.

<sup>124</sup> Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Huyện Điện Biên* (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2005), 83; Ban Nghiên cứu Lịch sử Đảng Lai-Châu, *Ba mươi năm Phấn đấu và Xây dựng của Đảng bộ Lai Châu* (Lai Châu, 1980), 40.

<sup>125</sup> Known in Vietnamese as *nộp bớt*. Trần Quyết, Phó chủ tịch UBND tỉnh Sơn La-Lai Châu, “Báo cáo tháng 6 năm 1948,” 20 July 1948, phòng PTTg (1945-54), NAVC 3, file no. 78, p. 4. Posts were a feature of French Empire more broadly; Galliéri intended them to provide a base for military patrols and function as markets to attract local participation. Porch (1986), 388, 392.

<sup>126</sup> For more on monopolies, cf., Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), 119-120; Philippe Le Failler, “Village Rebellions in the Tonkin Delta, 1900-1905,” in *Việt-Nam Exposé*, eds. Gisele Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002). On local scarcities, cf., Trần Quyết, “Báo cáo...” 20 July 1948, phòng PTTg (1945-54), NAVC 3, file no. 78, p. 4.

<sup>127</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, Ban Chấp hành Khu XX, “Báo cáo công tác vùng mới giải phóng trong hai tháng 10, 11/52,” 29 Dec 1952, phòng PTTg (1945-54), NAVC 3, file no. 1306, p. 3; Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm (1979), 139-141.

<sup>128</sup> Jerusalem (1953), 23.

move the greatest distance and learn new agricultural techniques suited to unfamiliar agro-ecological conditions.

Under Federation rule, tenure for irrigated land was managed under a complex system that grew out of old, *muang*-based traditions. By the early 1950s, in exchange for their loyalty to the Federation, the Thái nobility (*phìa tạo*) continued to enjoy dominant social positions; in addition, those who were its officials could call on bonded labor to farm the fields they allotted themselves. The principal of local rule accorded to the district chiefs and their subordinates meant they enjoyed considerable autonomy with regards to managing land and labor within their respective *muang* bailiwicks.<sup>129</sup> Except for a few fields the nobility owned privately, wet-rice land continued to be held in common. The Federation empowered senior males from noble families to distribute “common land” (*ruộng công*) to peasants in usufruct. “Free” peasants became eligible to receive a portion of common land should a member of their household serve the Federation as soldier (male), or dancer (female), or *corvée* laborer working on, for example, road crews.<sup>130</sup> Dancers joined troupes of young women trained in a “traditional” style of dance using fans (*xoè*) to entertain soldiers and officials—placing them at risk of abuse.

The Federation remunerated its officials by offering them a choice of grants in labor, grain, official land, or some combination thereof. According to their rank, officials were entitled either to receive a portion of taxed grain as annual payment; to control a parcel of land complete with peasants to farm it; and/or to keep female *xoè* dancers to serve as entertainment. Those farm families who labored on this “official land” (*ruộng chức*) were, essentially, bonded labor (*cuông* for Black Thái; *nhóc* for

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<sup>129</sup> Cầm Trọng and Hữu Ưng (1973), 54; Chabant (1951), 24-26.

<sup>130</sup> Duong Hồng Quang, “Việc chiếm hữu ruộng đất và thể lực phong kiến tại vùng dân tộc Thái ở Tây Bắc,” 22 Nov 1953, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), NAVC 3, file no. 1370; Cầm Trọng & Hữu Ưng (1973), 50.

White Thái). To gain access to official land required these “unfree” peasants to surrender a portion of their harvest and to provide farm labor such as cooking, hauling firewood, planting, etc.<sup>131</sup> For example, a district chief (*Tri châu*) in Lai Châu province was entitled to choose either a simple annual allotment of 250 quintaux of rice (25 metric tons); or 28 *mẫu* of wet-rice land (13.5 hectares) complete with 24 *nhóc* farm laborers to work it and 24 dancers to serve as entertainment.<sup>132</sup>

By virtue of their location in the mountains above valley *muang* politics, swidden agriculturalists were buffered from the feudal system controlling land and labor. Unlike the valley-dwelling Thái, the Hmong and Dao peoples living and farming at higher elevations had neither to perform corvée nor to provide sustenance for the Thái Battalions.<sup>133</sup> Nonetheless, Federation policies and politics alienated them as well. In particular, “the production of opium,” according to John T. McAlister, “had a sharp effect on the topographically stratified settlement pattern and complex ethnic mosaic.”<sup>134</sup> Hmong cultivators, as Jerusalem noted, were among the largest raw opium producers because their highland fields provided conditions under which the poppy grows best, i.e. at elevations above 1,000 meters. Grown only in these heights by ethnically-identified cultivators, contests over the frontier’s most lucrative cash crop throws into sharp relief the tensions embedded in the political-economy of colonial frontier rule.

Like other European colonies in Asia, French Indochina benefited substantially from revenue earned through regulating the production and trade of opium.<sup>135</sup> Prior to

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<sup>131</sup> Cầm Trọng (1978), 200-216.

<sup>132</sup> Le Failler (2010a), 275.

<sup>133</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo 3 tháng 4,5,6 năm 1949 của Liên-tỉnh Sơn La Lai Châu,” August 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19-20.

<sup>134</sup> McAlister (1967), 820.

<sup>135</sup> For comparisons with British empire in Singapore and Malaya, cf., Carl Trocki, *Opium and Empire: Chinese Society in Colonial Singapore, 1800-1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); for Dutch



and through World War II, French Indochina maintained a public monopoly on opium's purchase and sale. Cultivators in Tonkin's northern mountains were allowed to grow poppies only on the condition they declare and sell production to Indochina's Customs and State Monopolies (*Douanes et Régies*).<sup>136</sup> From 1898-1922, contributions from the opium industry contributed between 25-42% of the colony's total budgetary income.<sup>137</sup> Yet, in tacit acknowledgment of this crop's shamefully addictive properties, Sylvain Lévi's *Indochine*, an encyclopedic two volume work from 1931, fails to mention opium in a description of the colony's agricultural products.<sup>138</sup>

The Đèo clan grew rich, in part, by taking advantage of their local power in relation to this monopoly. They taxed opium's traffic, local consumption, and production; and, furthermore, engaged in their own illicit smuggling.<sup>139</sup> Between 1933-1940, colonial administrators of the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Territory reported annually the area of opium cultivation, the quantity produced, and its value, a summary of which appears below (see Table 1.2).

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empire in Java, see James R. Rush, *Opium to Java: Revenue Farming and Chinese Enterprise in Colonial Indonesia, 1860-1910* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

<sup>136</sup> As a lucrative "tax-farm," or a legal monopoly on the production and sale of controlled substances, regulating opium served to fill Indochina's coffers and finance capitalist development.

<sup>137</sup> Michaud (2000), 345. Cf., Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l'opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992); Philippe Le Failler, *Le Pilon des chimères* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 2001).

<sup>138</sup> Lévi, *Indochine* vol. 1 (1931), 75-87.

<sup>139</sup> Le Failler (2001), 89-90; Le Failler (2010a), 131-138.

Table 1.2: Reported opium production in 4<sup>th</sup> Military Territory, 1933-1940.<sup>140</sup>

Year	area cultivated (hectares)	Quantity produced (metric tons)	value (piasters)
1933	60	1	7,200
1934	350	15	108,000
1935	200	9	9,000
1936	45	2	2,600
1937	56	0.144	5,760
1938	95	3	--
1939	347.2	0.844	1,688
1940	397.2	1.322	99,150

Note that the quantity “produced” (*produit*) was not total gross production but, rather, the amount purchased locally by the Customs Service.<sup>141</sup> Nonetheless, these reported figures indicate that officially recognized opium production in the 4<sup>th</sup> Military Territory reached a peak in 1934 at 15 tons, 350 ha cultivated, and a value of 108,000 piasters; tonnage, area, and value then declined irregularly for five years. This decline was, perhaps, a result of pressure from the League of Nations exerted on France and other colonial merchants to prohibit the opium trade. With the outbreak of World War II, however, this trend reversed: the area under cultivation reached new highs (almost 400 hectares) and the market value jumped considerably.

The large rise in opium’s value between 1939-1940 reflects the quadrupling of its per unit price on the world market between 1939-43.<sup>142</sup> Alfred McCoy explains that war precipitated a world-wide opium “crisis.” Following the German conquest of France and the Japanese invasion of Indochina, the British navy imposed an embargo on shipping to and from Indochina, severing a historic supply line from the poppy

<sup>140</sup> Data compiled from “Rapports Economique pour le IVeme Territoire Militaire,” years 1933-40, NAVC 1, Fond Résident Supérieure au Tonkin, file nos. 74203-74120.

<sup>141</sup> Philippe Le Failler, personal communication 1 April 2010.

<sup>142</sup> LeFailler (2010a), 275.

fields of Persia and colonial India. To make up for lost overseas sources, Indochina's colonial government launched, what McCoy calls, a "massive effort to boost... opium production" among Hmong growers in Laos and northern Tonkin.<sup>143</sup>

Following restoration of colonial rule after World War II, opium emerged as a focal point of contested trade and production. When Đèo Văn Long returned from China to lead the Thái Federation, he not only positioned himself as indispensable to French efforts to secure Tonkin. He also grew richer by making opium central to their relationship. Notwithstanding the colonial government's abolishment of Indochina's opium monopoly in 1946, they granted the Thái Federation permission to structure its "autonomous" budget based on the taxation and sale of opium.<sup>144</sup>

Cultivators bore a high tax on their opium crop. In Lai Châu, Hmong households were assessed at 5 taels in kind (1 tael = 38 g) per registered resident and a "swidden tax" averaging 50 taels.<sup>145</sup> For the three years of 1947, 1948, and 1950, the opium tax earned the Federation, respectively, 753,000, 1.2 million, and 330,000 piasters based on officially reported harvests of 4.5 to 5 metric tons.<sup>146</sup> McAlister estimates, however, that Hmong cultivators declared only one-third of their annual opium harvest, raising production from the official 5 tons to approximately 15 tons per year.<sup>147</sup> Jerusalemly blamed the Customs Service for allowing all opium trade—legal commerce and contraband—"[to fall] into the hands of the Chinese."<sup>148</sup> In an attempt to recover a portion of contraband income, the Federation licensed and taxed gambling dens, the proprietors of which were mainly Chinese migrants. As such, the Federation

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<sup>143</sup> Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991), 113-115, 119-121.

<sup>144</sup> McCoy (1991), 131, 141-142.

<sup>145</sup> Nguyễn Khang, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 4.

<sup>146</sup> Year 1949 is curiously absent from Jerusalemly's figures. He reports that total Federation revenue ranged from 4.2 million piasters in 1947 to 6.1 million in 1948 to 5.4 million piasters in 1950 yet remained "more or less in deficit" (1953), 29-30, 82.

<sup>147</sup> McAlister (1967), 821.

<sup>148</sup> Jerusalemly (1953), 29.

levied a double tax on opium: first, to claim a portion of the declared crop; second, to recover some of what was smuggled.<sup>149</sup>

The Thái Federation introduced, and French forces amplified, the use of coercion in opium production and trade.<sup>150</sup> As the region's chief opium broker, Đèo Văn Long used the Thái Battalions to purchase the product directly from Hmong growers and other cultivators. So, in addition to their role as tax collectors, the Thái battalions acted as merchants as well, enforcing the Federation's legal monopoly on opium's purchase and trade. Although Jean Jerusalem ordered opium to be removed from the Federation budget in 1951, the region's growers and traders found new buyers.<sup>151</sup> Thereafter, French military intelligence, in a program known as "Operation X" under the command of Major Trinquier of the Mixed Airborne Commando Group (MACG), assumed control of the opium trade and redirected its proceeds to fund counterinsurgency operations.

Between 1951-1954, Operation X's peak years, Trinquier coordinated the purchase of opium through French-allied Thái Federation and Lao buyers; and then shipped the commodity to Saigon for marketing and distribution. Trinquier used the income to fund efforts to recruit and transform hill peoples into *maquis*—self-sustaining units working in tandem with the French military to supply intelligence and to fight "insurgents." McCoy lists three such *maquis* as active during the first Indochina War: the Thái *maquis* under Đèo Văn Long; the Hmong *maquis* under Touby Lyfoung in Laos; and another Hmong *maquis* east of the Red River in northern

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<sup>149</sup> Lt Colonel Imfeld observed: "The Thái budget, in receipts, was exclusively furnished by the Hmong who contributed half with raw opium and, the other half, indirectly, through the Chinese intermediaries who placed as bets the profits of their contraband opium." Jerusalem (1953), 79.

<sup>150</sup> In 1940, colonial administrators decided not to work directly with Hmong growers and, instead, began to employ local Thái leaders as opium brokers. McCoy (1991), 121.

<sup>151</sup> Le Failler (2010a), 275.

Tonkin.<sup>152</sup>

Opium had emerged, according to Philippe Le Failler, as, “the nerve of the war,” in reference to the topic’s sensitivity, its contested production and exchange, and its role in the underground arms trade.<sup>153</sup> Agents allied with the DRV observed that opium cultivators, foremost among others the Hmong, chafed not only at the force used to purchase their crop but also at the low prices paid in relation to that fetched downstream in Hanoi’s markets.<sup>154</sup> Jerusalemly confirms this inequality and observes the role of local Chinese traders: they purchased opium at prices between 800-1500 piasters per kilogram and sold the product in Hanoi for between 13,000-15,000 piasters per kg.<sup>155</sup> The roughly ten-fold price disparity drove a thriving underground market, one that linked growers to revolutionaries exchanging salt for opium.

Salt and opium were the principal commodities animating a politically significant exchange in the frontier and across its borderlines. During World War II, David Marr reports that salt could be purchased on Tonkin’s coast for 0.20 piasters per kilogram but, in the Indochina/Yunnan border areas, salt was known as “white gold” and sold for as much as 50 times its purchase price.<sup>156</sup> Ten years later, Jerusalemly reported salt’s selling price in the Thái Federation as 12-15 piasters per kg for rock salt mined in Yunnan versus 20-25 piasters per kg for sea salt evaporated along the Red River delta’s outer fringe.<sup>157</sup> One estimate places these two commodities in terms of a roughly equivalent relation: 1 kg opium = 1000 piasters = 100 kg salt.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Relationships formed in Operation X became the basis for Central Intelligence Agency activities in the “Secret War” in Laos (1960-74). Furthermore, the *maquis* counter-insurgency model served the CIA as inspiration for subsequent interventions in, for ex., Afghanistan. McCoy (1991), 131-146, 289.

<sup>153</sup> Le Failler (2010a), 275-277.

<sup>154</sup> Sa Văn Minh, UBKCHC Liên tỉnh Sơn La-Lai Châu, “Báo cáo ba tháng (tháng 7,8, và 9 năm 1948),” no date, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 2; Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” Aug 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 10.

<sup>155</sup> Jerusalemly (1953), 29.

<sup>156</sup> Marr (1995), 246.

<sup>157</sup> Jerusalemly (1953), 30. Seasalt was more expensive because its iodine content treated goiter.

<sup>158</sup> Jason Picard, “Vietminh Economics” (MA Thesis, Cornell University, 2004), 53.

By bringing salt from the Red River delta to trade for opium with highland growers, Viet Minh agents manipulated these geographically-determined price disparities to arm themselves. Once Viet Minh agents obtained opium, they bartered it for weaponry by tapping into a transnational network of Chinese merchants trading in surplus from China's civil war.<sup>159</sup> Expressed monetarily, the sums involved were staggering: McAlister estimates that in 1947 all of Indochina (i.e., northern Tonkin and Laos) produced 38 tons of marketable raw opium worth approximately 400 million piasters. This monetary sum was roughly equivalent to the 1948 value of what was, officially, Indochina's most valuable commodity—233,000 tons of exported rice. He estimates that opium proceeds from this illicit trade amounted to income sufficient to arm all six divisions of the People's Army in 1952.<sup>160</sup> In subsequent chapters, I return to the political implications of the salt exchange with regards to Viet Minh organizing and rising DRV power: by providing nutritive use value to local residents accustomed to salt's scarcity, cadres appropriated the commodity's exchange value to legitimate their personal power as well as that of the DRV.

In sum, Federation and French (mis)management of the opium trade led to two significant contradictions. First, incomplete "legal" regulation of the opium crop contributed to "illegal" smuggling and, ironically, empowered their adversaries. By capitalizing on a form of lucrative arbitrage among cross-border smugglers, anti-colonial leaders armed themselves against the French and the Federation. Second, the use of force exacerbated uneven exchange relations and contributed to a willingness among many Hmong cultivators to support the revolutionary cause against the Thái Federation.<sup>161</sup> More broadly, many Hmong people grew suspicious of what they saw as a White Thái bid towards regional supremacy and, in increasing numbers during

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<sup>159</sup> McAlister (1967), 821-824; McCoy (1991).

<sup>160</sup> McAlister (1967), 822. Cf., Picard (2004).

<sup>161</sup> McCoy (1991), 131-143; McAlister (1967).

Federation rule, joined a growing anti-colonial movement. Initially, according to a 1949 report by the DRV's Sơn-Lai Committee, the Hmong were only "lukewarm" (*lùng chừng*) towards the "Việt Minh regime." But once the French began "killing" and "arresting" Hmong people as well as "burning" and "destroying" their property, they began to "hate" the French and turned favorably towards the resistance.<sup>162</sup>

If French, Federation, and DRV reports alike tend to treat ethnicity as given social fact, then note that no one ethnically-defined social group acted as a unified bloc, as though their interests were exclusively "ethnic" in nature and immutable over time. In the Black River region, opposition among Hmong peoples towards the Federation was similar to disaffected Black Thái peoples who increasingly followed Cầm Văn Dung around Sơn La and Lò Văn Hặc around Điện Biên: the Federation's own practices reproduced ethnic identity as a basis for advantage or disadvantage with respect to enmeshed relations of rule, production, and exchange. Although many Hmong supported the anti-colonial cause through 1954, their long-term allegiance to DRV-led social transformation was never guaranteed. In the Việt Bắc region to the east, many Hmong sided with the French and against Viet Minh and DRV. To the west in northern Laos, many Hmong remained loyal to the French and resisted the revolutionary Pathet Lao.<sup>163</sup> In these latter cases, such spatialized and ethnicized opposition among poppy-growers to revolutionary anti-colonialism was, at least partially, an effect of counter-insurgency operations and, by extension, a chimera-like outgrowth of colonial divide and rule.

Perhaps no place better exemplified these ethnicized contests over political office and agrarian production than the district of Điện Biên Phủ. Stretching like a north-south island in a sea of mountainous terrain, the Mường Thanh plain is a

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<sup>162</sup> Lò Văn Mười, "Báo cáo 3 tháng 1, 2, 3 năm 1949 của UBKCHC Liên tỉnh Sơn Lai," 5 April 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 14.

<sup>163</sup> McAlister (1967), 819; McCoy (1991), 138-139.

geological anomaly, what Pierre Gourou called, a “profound accident.”<sup>164</sup> The spacious, flat terrain (18 km long by 6 km wide) supported irrigated rice cultivation on a scale (up to 6000 hectares) possible in few areas of mainland Southeast Asia outside the alluvial plains located far downstream. In the late 1940s, approximately 15,000 Black Thái residents lived and grew rice there. Their labors made the district’s annual rice crop the largest of any *muang* district in the Federation. In 1953, at 4,000 tons, rice production amounted to 30% of the Federation’s total potential. Situated above the plain, another 12,000 Hmong residents lived in the hills and mountains where they farmed swidden, raised livestock, and grew poppies. In the early 1950s, approximately 10% of all northern Tonkin’s marketable opium, or half the Federation’s total, originated in these heights: “Điện Biên Phủ,” McAlister writes, “was the most concentrated producer of opium in Vietnam.”<sup>165</sup> When Đèo Văn Long dismissed Lò Văn Hặc in 1946, many Black Thái residents saw a bold assertion of White Thái power, an expansionist attempt from Lai Châu to claim this rice bowl. Many Hmong understood this same move as part of a broader Thái effort to gain greater control of their most saleable agricultural commodity. Like many Black Thái residents on its plain, many Hmong in Điện Biên Phủ’s hills sought an alternative by supporting the revolutionary movement.

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<sup>164</sup> Pierre Gourou (1940), 34-35.

<sup>165</sup> Although McAlister’s quote contains an anachronism (at the time, most local people did not consider themselves “Vietnamese” nor this area to be part of “Vietnam”), his statement nonetheless conveys the value of Dien Bien’s opium crop in relation to broader political configurations (1967), 823-825.



## CHAPTER 3

### CONTESTING A FRONTIER

#### *Archival silences and historical uncertainties*

From the mid-1940s to the early 1950s, the Black River region appeared to be a borderlands all over again: site of multiply contested, powerful projects to claim its territory and people. French Indochina endeavored to reconstitute itself after World War II and supported the establishment of the Thái Federation to rule northwest Tonkin's strategic frontier. Meanwhile, popular uprisings known collectively as the "August Revolution" and the DRV's declaration of independence in 1945 signaled rising challenges to colonial claims and an evolving project to institute an alternative form of rule. Like the French colonial regime, central elites cast the Black River region as a frontier, an edge of their rule, and worked to configure relations among local and regional Thái elites. Notwithstanding their mutual exclusivity, the two projects shared a regime of territoriality based on bounded space and sovereign rule. The previous chapter focused on the making and remaking of French rule. This chapter focuses on oppositional movements and the unsteady making of a Vietnamese political project.

If competing political projects both cast the Black River region as a singular frontier and denied the persistence of multiple frontiers, then telling this story must contend with paucity of source material. State-based sources provide spotty coverage: for seven or so years, archival source availability is the exception rather than the norm. National Archives in Hanoi contain no locally produced source material from 1945 to mid-1948 and from late 1950 to late 1952.<sup>1</sup> Between mid-1948 to mid-1950, the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2006-07, I consulted the following record groups of the National Archives of Vietnam Center 3: Prime Minister's Secretariat (PTTg), Ministry of Culture (BVH), Northwest Autonomous Zone Administrative Committee (UBHC KTTTB), Việt Bắc Autonomous Zone Administrative Committee

archives only offer reports issued by the Son La-Lai Châu Interprovince Resistance and Administrative Committee.<sup>2</sup> There are two distinct gaps, therefore, covering what might be considered two separate periods in the Black River region's history: first, local uprisings and the onset of anti-colonial warfare; second, escalation of warfare pursuant to a reorganized DRV's rapid territorial expansion.

Alternative source materials betray revealing tendencies. Vietnamese-language official histories and nationalist scholarship present narratives that tend to paper over any breaks. They offer unbroken stories of "resistance" to French colonialism or steady "construction" of Party, state, and/or military institutions continuing from the so-called August Revolution of 1945 to the endpoint of "national victory" at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. In these accounts, rupture only comes with the purported end of colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> Like narratives of frontier expansionism, stories of "revolution" and "resistance" present a telos guided by steady progress and linear advance from a state-centric perspective.

Nationalist and official histories, as well as their (limited) source materials, do other work as well. Nationalist scholars tend to reify historically emergent collectivities by explaining causality and outcome according to preconceived chronologies, categories, and territories.<sup>4</sup> Official histories not only repeat these

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(UBHC KTTVB), and Sơn La-Lai Châu Administrative Committee (UBHC Sơn La-Lai Châu). For more on NAVC 3, cf., Phạm Thị Bích Hải et al, *Guide to the Collections of National Archives Centre III* (Hanoi: NXB Văn hoá Thông tin, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Records of the *Ủy ban Kháng chiến Hành chính Liên tỉnh Sơn-Lai* are available in NAVC Center 3's Phủ thủ tướng (1945-54) record group.

<sup>3</sup> Even then, as Patricia Pelley notes of Vietnam and other decolonizing societies, "one cannot precisely locate the moment when the colonial period is past." *Postcolonial Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press), 5. For a critique of nationalist thought's colonial origins, cf., Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Note how the title of Cầm Trọng's otherwise valuable work, *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1978) places Thái people in a spatial frame projected into the distant past as an already conceived "Northwest Vietnam." More troubling, Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm's narrative excludes multiple and competing claims to Mường Thanh, or Điện Biên Phủ, by exalting its "long-standing" and "heroic" place in "the northwest of the Vietnamese homeland" since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. *Điện Biên trong Lịch sử* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1979): 36.

nationalist tendencies but also obscure their own authorship and that of historical events: often authored by “committees,” these works name names only at foundational moments and, from then on, tend to grant institutions a life of their own.<sup>5</sup> Archived official documents are their first draft, contributing as well to the reproduction of powerful silences.<sup>6</sup> In language they all use, seemingly neutral social categories such as the “masses” (*quần chúng*) or territorial descriptors like the “Northwest” (*Tây Bắc*) do powerful legitimation work: local Thái elites and Kinh cadres deployed these ideological (mis)representations to portray a singular region and a unified people always already located in Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Just as homogenizing social categories silence socially-different peoples, the flattening cartographic descriptor erases their alternative spatial orientations.

By reading multiple silences against such official and nationalist vocality, I argue that this period figures in a longer, ongoing social process of legitimation and boundary-making.<sup>8</sup> That all these histories and contemporaneous reports were written in the Vietnamese “national script” (*quốc ngữ*) is, in and of itself, analytically significant. In the 1940s and early 1950s, very few residents of the Black River region even spoke Vietnamese—the language of emerging bureaucracy *and* dominant community—much less read or wrote it. Reading these sources critically and taking

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<sup>5</sup> By official histories, I refer to military and Party histories authored by committee located internal to the institution in question. Cf., Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La, *Sơn La: Lịch sử Kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1995); Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên, *Lịch sử Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên Tập I (1950-2000)* (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2005). If privileged access to archived documents makes these sources invaluable, then such access is symptomatic of a larger problem: official historians draw on their institutional position to portray institutions as always already formed, unitary, and historically continuous.

<sup>6</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Sam Kaplan, “Documenting History, Historicizing Documentation: French Military Officials’ Ethnological Reports on Cilicia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44 (2002): 344-369.

<sup>7</sup> This is a powerful example of the geobody at work. Cf., Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of the Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

their language seriously, however, provides a methodological tool to understand both what happened in the past and how outcomes are justified in the present.

Historiographic commissions do *do* something: historical silences speak to telling omissions. That residents of the Black River region and subjects of the Thái Federation would end up “Vietnamese” was contingent on their reconstruction as members of a rising nation, on terms often at odds with alternative forms of communal and spatial solidarity. This was a long, violent, and highly contested process. By opening up these silences and tracing archival ambiguities, I show the contentious and conflicted processes of statemaking.

How does one open up these silences? How does an analyst tell a story marked by discontinuities in the historical record? This is a methodological problem with empirical significance. Critical scholars read limited contemporaneous source materials as indicative of real, on-the-ground uncertainty and conditions of rapid social change. In his classic history of World War II and the (re)emergence of “Vietnam” in 1945, David Marr acknowledges limited primary sources and observes regional disparities in political developments to make a bold claim. In contrast to efforts aimed at producing “national history” or demonstrating “Party” leadership from 1930 or 1941 onward, his work demonstrates that “no one was in control.” After March 1945, he argues, “events took on a spontaneous momentum” and Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) members and Viet Minh followers “were successful more because of their ability to react quickly to sudden changes than because of any adherence to a master plan.”<sup>9</sup>

Marr’s deft handling of source ambiguities provides a vital historical and historiographic insight, one echoed in subsequent scholarship, including my own. On a larger spatial scale, authors of a history of French Indochina observe, “The period

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<sup>9</sup> David Marr, *Vietnam 1945* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 6.

from 1947 to 1950 was characterized by uncertainty.”<sup>10</sup> Regarding the Black River region, Philippe Le Failler characterizes the years between 1945-48, or the end of World War II and the founding of the Thái Federation, as a moment of “disappearance, revolution, and confusion.”<sup>11</sup> On a longer temporal scale, a diplomatic historian reconsiders “Vietnam” during one of its many wars in the post-WWII period. “The outcomes and legacies of the French war,” writes Mark Bradley, “were considerably more uncertain than the apparent Vietnamese victory in 1954 would suggest.”<sup>12</sup> I draw from these insights to argue that the ambiguities, discontinuities, and uncertainties found in the archival record serve to indicate the very conditions historical actors themselves confronted in their everyday lives.

In a similar vein, advocates of reading archives ethnographically have questioned the premise that archives contain un-mediated, objective accounts of actions, figures, and events. Archival production and historical reproduction are sites of inter-related power in which silences coexist alongside textual vocality.<sup>13</sup> This insight provides a key to interpreting Hanoi’s archival holdings: in between two moments of silence—and reproducing more along the way—the DRV scribes and state-makers who made sources between 1948 and 1950 worked in uncertain, rapidly changing conditions among peoples they did not always understand. Indeed, archives are “records of uncertainty and doubt,” writes Anne Stoler, “in how people imagined they could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing world.” She advocates an approach grounded in historical ethnography that takes the “sentiments expressed and ascribed” in archival records “as indices of relations of power and

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<sup>10</sup> Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 361.

<sup>11</sup> Philippe Le Failler, *La Rivière Noire: L’Histoire d’une Marche Frontière* (March 2010a, draft manuscript), 257.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42.

<sup>13</sup> “The production of historical narratives involves the uneven distribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production.” Trouillot (1995), xix.

traces of them.”<sup>14</sup> In this chapter, I track power in the Black River region—and the limits of any one of its projects—by bringing archival silences together with the varied historical sources that interrupt or deny them.

What emerges from a critical engagement with source materials is a composite picture of the Black River region in a period—or periods—of competing displays of solidarity, institutional development and legitimation, alliances broken or remade, emergent systems of exchange, and politically organized violence. Even defining who exactly was competing with or against whom risks simplifying complex and mutable social relations: statist categories of “friend” and “enemy” changed frequently and reflected an ideological agenda. Moreover, DRV record-makers and Viet Minh agents deployed a self-styled comparison to differentiate themselves from French colonial and Thái Federation rule in order to legitimize their own project.

As such, the analyst must treat the ideologically-loaded claims to difference between “colonial” and “revolutionary” political projects with skepticism. For example, in a Sơn Lai Committee report from mid-1949, the Thái elite and revolutionary partisan Lò Văn Mười discussed the two “apparatuses” (*bộ máy*), or forms of local government, contesting one another to rule people and territory. He observed that the “French pirates” mistreat Sơn La’s “puppets,” or Black Thái (Thái Federation) officials, and (un)intentionally cause unrest among the people there. Then, French administrators approach Lai Châu’s “puppets,” or White Thái (Thái Federation) officials, to complain about the “mediocrity” of Sơn La’s officials and offer a deal: should Lai Châu’s officials be able to suppress the “movement and struggle” in Sơn La, then the French military will reward them by allocating the domain of Mường La to “the people of Lai Châu to rule.” Reflecting on this situation, Lò Văn Mười concludes with some advice for contemporaries and successors

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 4, 33.

associated with the DRV project: “[we] can take advantage of this above attitude to split the puppet ranks.”<sup>15</sup>

This anecdote calls into question what nationalist scholars and state scribes alike have attributed *only* to colonialism: a strategy of divide and rule. Evidently, an emergent coalition of elite Thái partisans, DRV cadres, and Việt Minh agents countered colonial strategy not only by ostensibly “unifying the nation” but also by using divide and rule against itself. Lò Văn Mười described, in his own words, a larger contest between two competing centers pursuing strikingly similar goals: to gain the loyalty of an hereditary Thái elite (*phìa tạo*); to take advantage of their control over *muang* spaces and populations; to enlist local rulers in centralizing political projects and position them on the edge of respective domains.

If there were similarities between these opposed state-making projects, particularly with regards to the recruitment of Thái elites, then there were also socially recognized differences. As the above anecdote suggests, DRV and Thái Federation had, by 1949, staked out two spaces and populations with oppositional forms of rule: the former in parts of Sơn La province and the latter in much of Lai Châu. Within its self-styled “free zones,” the DRV and the Việt Minh Front operated a nascent territorial administration and a series of economic, political, and social programs—all of which posed as alternatives to “enemy occupied” zones, or the Federation’s form of territorial rule. These differences, and their ideological import, figured as a consistent theme in DRV propaganda and education. I concentrate on the production of difference and recognize its ongoing reproduction in official and nationalist histories.

The historiographic question of linearity and progress regarding the DRV’s political program hinges, perhaps, on the question of territorial sovereignty. Between

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<sup>15</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo tháng 4,5,6 năm 1949 của Liên-Tỉnh Sơn La Lai Châu,” year 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 7.

1948-1950, guerilla forces destabilized *muang* spaces allowing Việt Minh agents to work and a DRV administration to establish itself. To put it another way, military force attempted to secure territory for emergent state institutions, the personnel of which then worked to legitimate their power among resident populations. Yet, by late 1950, a newly strengthened colonial military demonstrated that the DRV's military force was either unwilling or unable to secure the Black River region. That the DRV lost control of Son La and Lai Châu, halting production of archived local reports, disrupts any idea of steady linear progression towards singular, undisputed rule.

### ***Opposition, revolt, alliance***

During and immediately after World War II, oppositional movements and revolutionary sentiments emerged in Son La and, then, apparently, disappeared. Notwithstanding the tumultuous and under documented years of world war, the period from the end of World War II to creation of the Thái Federation in 1948 is the first of two large gaps in the region's historical record; this chapter ends with another gap, from late 1950 to late 1952. Papering over gaps such as these, nationalist historians devote much attention to what they consider to be an originary moment, i.e. the "August Revolution" of 1945, and presume continuity and solidarity with later anti-colonial and statemaking activities. I investigate the appearance of a revolutionary movement and not its disappearance but, rather, its subsequent transformation. I argue that local Thái elites refashioned competing political claims to serve their own interests, engaging in a heavily-contested process with uncertain outcomes.

During World War II, under Japanese occupation, Thái leaders worked with Viet Minh Front agents to organize Thái peoples populating the valleys, and along the road, from Son La town to Mai Sơn and Mộc Châu. The Việt Minh United Front had been established at the ICP's 8<sup>th</sup> Plenum in May 1941 to act as a united front



organization, led by the Party, to work against fascism and towards a goal of “national liberation.”<sup>16</sup> The Council of Thái People’s National Salvation and Young Thái for National Salvation, both founded in 1943, became the region’s first “national salvation” (*cứu quốc*) organizations.<sup>17</sup> Through a short-lived bilingual newspaper (printed in Thái script and Romanized Vietnamese) called *Lắc Mừng*, these organizations proclaimed a message of “Thái-Kinh unity.” Cầm Trọng writes that these local front organizations appealed to elites disaffected with the current state of affairs, assembling members from two strata of “wealthy peasants without office or power; and Thái aristocracy who had lost power [and] office.” Their goal, he writes, was to “resist the lords (*phìa tào*) holding power.”<sup>18</sup>

In late World War II, a coup de force by Japanese forces presented emerging oppositional alliances, and allied local elites, with new opportunities. On 9 March 1945, Japanese forces in Indochina suddenly reversed 4 years’ of collaboration, toppled the French administration, and began to rule directly. Thái elites and Việt Minh agents began to plot seizure of the local government. Only days after the coup, some 200 political prisoners, all of whom were Party members, escaped from the Sơn La penitentiary. After making contact with ICP superiors in Hanoi (*Xứ ủy*), some returned back to Sơn La to organize locally and assumed leadership of the Việt Minh’s provincial unit. In July and August, units of the Liberation Army crossed the Red River, moved into Thái areas on its west bank (including Yên Bái, Nghĩa Lộ), and crossed the Black River into eastern Sơn La.<sup>19</sup> They encountered little resistance from

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<sup>16</sup> Brocheux and Hémery (2009), 350; Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 256-264.

<sup>17</sup> Or, *Hội người Thái cứu quốc* in Sơn La and Mường La and *Thanh niên Thái cứu quốc* in Mường Chanh (Mai Sơn). Cầm Trọng (1978), 500-503.

<sup>18</sup> Cầm Trọng (1978), 505-06, 515, 519.

<sup>19</sup> The Vietnamese Liberation Army (*Quân giải phóng*) was modeled on, and supported by, China’s People’s Liberation Army. Cf., Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982), 280-284. With the DRV’s Declaration of Independence on 2 Sept 1945, its name changed to the People’s Army of Vietnam (*Quân đội Nhân dân Việt Nam*). Cf., Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 142-143.

demoralized Japanese forces. In late August, Chu Văn Thịnh, a Party member appointed and trained by the “Central Government” (located in the Việt Bắc region north of Hanoi), convened a conference in Sơn La town attended by Việt Minh organizers and Thái elites: together, they issued a call for an uprising.<sup>20</sup>

The call to revolt found an audience among select Thái communities. On 22 August 1945 an uprising spread through some of Sơn La’s *muang*, part of a loosely coordinated effort known as the “August Revolution.” Armed supporters marched from Sơn La town to challenge Bạc Cầm Quý in Thuận Châu and led to his rule’s “collapse.” After former colonial official Xa Văn Minh joined the Việt Minh uprising in Mộc Châu, they found themselves competing with another nationalist party (*Đại Việt*). Cầm Văn Dung led the revolt in Mai Sơn and forced *tri châu* Cầm Văn Chiêu to surrender. Following displays of revolutionary solidarity (like hoisting the flag), seizure of weaponry from Japanese soldiers, and raids on grain storehouses, participants fell back to Sơn La town and endeavored to coordinate a two-pronged resistance government. Chu Văn Thịnh led the Việt Minh’s Sơn La Provincial Leadership Council; Lò Văn Mười (of Thuận Châu) served as treasurer and Cầm Văn Minh as secretary. Cầm Văn Dung chaired the Sơn La Province People’s Provisional Revolutionary Committee; Chu Văn Thịnh was vice-chair and Xa Văn Minh a representative.<sup>21</sup>

Notwithstanding what nationalist histories allege was their “success,” the uprisings of August 1945 were spatially limited, short-lived, and multiply contested.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 35-36; Cao Văn Lượng et al, *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân khu Tây Bắc (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội), 52.

<sup>21</sup> *Ban cán sự Tỉnh bộ Việt Minh* and *Ủy ban nhân dân cách mạng lâm thời*, respectively. Cầm Trọng (1978), 512-515; Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 41-45; Cao Văn Lượng et al (2003), 64-67.

<sup>22</sup> An official military history states, “the process of building and defending the government” was crushed but Sơn La’s people “came to understand more clearly their own rights.” Bộ chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 55-56. The claim regarding popular awareness of “rights” goes unsubstantiated and, given historical conditions of bonded labor and hereditary land control, seems anachronistic at best.

Revolts occurred along two axes: one south of the Black River from Thuận Châu through Sơn La town to Mộc Châu; the second west of the Red River, closer to the Việt Bắc base area, in Yên Bái and Nghĩa Lộ.<sup>23</sup> On August 31, Nationalist Chinese forces arrived in Sơn La town from Yunnan and, in response to a revolutionary delegation's diplomatic gesture, disarmed them and usurped their self-proclaimed authority. Members of Sơn La's Viet Minh Council and Revolutionary Committee scattered.<sup>24</sup> In addition to their superior force, the Chinese units supported a rival organization, the Nationalist Party of Vietnam (*Quốc dân Đảng* or VNQDD) which, in contrast to Viet Minh failures in Lai Châu, gained support of Đèo Văn Ân of Phong Thổ.<sup>25</sup> The presence of a rival anti-colonial political party in Lai Châu and Yên Bái, like the *Đại Việt* party in Mộc Châu, points to contests already underway, and the inter-party violence ahead, regarding representations and aspirations of anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>26</sup>

On 1 February 1946, shortly after the departure of VNQDD organizers, Đèo Văn Ân welcomed his fellow clansman Đèo Văn Long who accompanied French forces returning from exile in Yunnan. Over the next year, Đèo Văn Long worked with the French forces to renew and enforce a claim to the Black River region. Notwithstanding scattered resistance, by mid-1947, writes Cầm Trọng, all “Thái areas,” or *muang*-based population centers, were controlled by the “enemy.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the Thái Federation was on the rise.

Nationalist historians trace leadership of Sơn La's revolt to elite Thái families and point to their emerging extra-local relations with several powerful opponents.

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<sup>23</sup> For more on activities in Yên Bái, cf., Cao Văn Lược et al (2003), 52-67.

<sup>24</sup> Marr (1995), 421; Cầm Trọng (1978), 519-520.

<sup>25</sup> Le Failler (2010a), 262. Cầm Trọng writes in late 1945 Đèo Văn Mun, Lai Châu's province chief, rebuffed two delegations led by Chu Văn Thịnh and then Cầm Văn Dung (1978), 519-521.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the Nationalist Party of Vietnam, cf., *The Birth of the Party State: Vietnam since 1945*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Benoit de Treglode (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> Cầm Trọng (1978), 529.

Identifying who participated in the Sơn La uprising (such as Cầm Văn Dung, Xa Văn Minh, Lò Văn Mười) and who did not (Bạc Cầm Quý, Đèo Văn Ân, Đèo Văn Long) points to the rivalries and contests inherent in, and emerging from, *muang* control. These early relations also illustrate how Việt Minh organizers, their nationalist rivals, and architects of neocolonialism all drew on these splits among Thái elites to form alliances.<sup>28</sup> As noted by Cầm Trọng above, and confirmed by other observers, organizations in Sơn La affiliated with the Việt Minh Front appealed to members of elite Thái families either disaffected with or dismissed from positions associated with prevailing forms of local rule—either Japanese occupation or renewed French colonialism—and did not (yet) generate mass support.<sup>29</sup> Although John T. McAlister associates Việt Minh with Black Thái and Federation with White Thái, the actions of historical actors belie any neat ethnic division to explain support for, respectively, revolutionary or neocolonial rule.<sup>30</sup> Rather, Thái elites forged coalitions with agents representing one of multiple colonial or nationalist political formations to reproduce claims to *muang*-based and, even, regional rule.

If members of the Thái elite claimed continued rule of respective *muang* domains, then what Cầm Trọng calls “Thái-Kinh unity” points to departures from earlier patterns. First, that only the “Thái” feature locally in this self-proclaimed unity

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<sup>28</sup> Curiously absent from Cầm Trọng (1978) is Lò Văn Hặc who, after serving as district chief of Điện Biên Phủ during the war, was dismissed by Đèo Văn Long in 1946. Evidently, he spent the next several years collaborating with revolutionary sympathizers in Laos and the Việt Bắc before returning in 1953. Cf., Công an tỉnh Lai Châu, *Lịch sử Công an Nhân dân huyện Điện Biên (1952-1975)* (Hanoi: NXB Công an Nhân dân), 11-14, 23-26; Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên (2005), 41-47.

<sup>29</sup> Jean Jerusalem observes, “In part because of the misfortunate tentativeness of agrarian reform, one can therefore surmise that Vietminh politics in Sơn La, from 1945 to early 1947, viewed in sum, was not to indoctrinate the masses in a routine fashion but was applied to the local feudal chiefs, to stir up their hatred and their rivalries with the Đeos.” *Monographie du Pay Thai* (typescript, 1953), 54-55. Cf., John T. McAlister, “Mountain Minorities and The Viet Minh: A Key to The Indochina War,” in *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, Nations*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 810-813; Le Failler (2010a), 259-265.

<sup>30</sup> McAlister (1967), 810. For example: Xa Văn Minh, White Thái from Mộc Châu, supported the Việt Minh enthusiastically and later served in the DRV; Bạc Cầm Quý, Black Thái of Thuận Châu, supported the Federation as Sơn La’s Province Chief.

indicates that neither group had yet to recognize claims or rights of myriad non-Thái peoples living amidst and between the *muang*. From World War II to 1947, traces of non-Thái peoples are notably absent in official and nationalist histories. This limited form of unity indicates the uncertain work of redrawing national boundaries to include or exclude the region's diverse local populations.

If such exclusion was not dissimilar to past and future Đèo clan rule, the arrival of Việt Minh units indicates a profound shift. Revolutionary agents were the outriders of the latest in-migration to the Black River region, this time by armed Kinh/Viet peoples. Indeed, the idea of “Thái-Kinh unity” shows that prior to the “August Revolution,” Việt Minh agents had already begun to arrive in sufficient numbers and with sufficient force to contest colonial boundaries regulating traffic between upstream and downstream peoples.<sup>31</sup> World War II and the uprisings in its wake signal an emerging—and lasting—political relationship between Thái and Kinh elites.

How did Kinh elites commanding these units conceive of their agenda? In early 1947, the Minister of Defense sent a revealing letter to the army's “Western Advance” (*Tây tiến*) units. Minister Võ Nguyên Giáp warned of colonial strategies to “use Vietnamese to fight Vietnamese, split the sibling minorities, [and] establish minority Vietnamese military units to fight us.” In response, the Minister from Quảng Bình admonished his soldier audience to consider that “each bit of land in the West is a bit of land belonging to the Vietnamese homeland” and to remember that “each compatriot from the Western region is a Vietnamese person.”<sup>32</sup>

The letter articulated—and served to naturalize—a powerful two-fold claim on the Black River's people and place, refiguring them on the margins of national

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<sup>31</sup> Cầm Trọng quotes from the bilingual *Lắc Mùong*: “Do not split the Thái people, the Kinh people... stand together...” (1978), 519.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Ban Nghiên cứu Lịch sử Đảng Lai-Châu, *Ba mươi năm Phấn đấu và Xây dựng của Đảng bộ Lai Châu* (Lai Châu, 1980), 19.

community and projected state space. Coming from a Kinh military commander, the letter staked a forceful claim to Black River soil, yet one that relocated its place as “our rear area,” or a frontier on the edge of centrally-projected territory. Giáp’s letter also repositioned the region’s residents as members of a community divided against itself, yet in terms that disadvantaged them as “minorities.” These ideas of national community and territory configured together as “Vietnamese”—and the force that accompanied them—provide an early example of militarized state-making at work.

### ***Emergent organizations***

By the late 1940s, according to accepted scholarly accounts on “Vietnam,” local revolutionary organizations throughout Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina began to assume a lasting shape. Drawing on popular support and personnel organized by the Viet Minh United Front during World War II, elected Popular Assemblies (*Hội đồng nhân dân*) emerged in 1945 and 1946 as newly formed democratic institutions. After diplomatic negotiations gave way to warfare in December 1946, however, the DRV issued a decree in October 1947 ordering the suspension of Assemblies and reallocating their executive function to combined committees composed of appointed members.<sup>33</sup> Resistance Committees merged with Administrative Committees to act as the revolutionary government’s executive branch at each territorial division.<sup>34</sup> In so doing, the DRV attempted to join military “resistance” and civilian “administration” organizations to corral and cajole locally emergent revolutionary sentiments and outbursts of support.

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<sup>33</sup> For more on Fontainebleau and Dalat negotiations, see Bradley (2007), 46-47; Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 151-152. For more on DRV decrees, see George Ginsburgs, “Local Government and Administration in North Vietnam, 1945-1954,” *China Quarterly* 10 (1962), 188-189; Bernard B. Fall, “Local Administration under the Viet Minh,” *Pacific Affairs* 27 (1954), 55.

<sup>34</sup> Resistance Committees had been composed of members of the Indochina Communist Party and the Liên Việt Front (formerly Viet Minh United Front). Fall (1954), 54-55; Lockhart (1989), 194-196.

This consolidation did not happen uniformly across the space claimed as “Vietnam.” Beginning in 1948, archival documents from the DRV open a contemporaneous perspective on this period with regards to organizational activities in the Black River region. These documents confirm the significance of Administrative Resistance Committees but contradict the alleged abolishment of Popular Assemblies. Much like nationalist and official histories, however, archival sources can also mislead. I argue that this textual confusion might well reflect conditions on the ground similar to the aftermath of World War II.

Institutions came and went while the people constituting them shifted back and forth. For example, a DRV report from 1948 mentions that Cầm Văn Dung was chairman (*chủ nhiệm*) of Mountain Nation Interzone 10 (*Quốc Dân Miền Núi L/K 10*); it also relayed a request from the people of Mai Sơn that Cầm Văn Dung, as “Chairman of the FQDMN,” lead an inspection tour of newly created revolutionary organizations.<sup>35</sup> What was this organization? Cầm Trọng writes that in early 1948, the Central Government founded a regional revolutionary base (*căn cứ địa*), administered by “Mountain Nation Interzone X” and led by “Cầm Văn Dung.”<sup>36</sup> Yet the organization itself appears only ephemerally in these two sources, its short-lived existence perhaps the result of a Party order.<sup>37</sup> In any event, the Mountain Nation did not merit its own file in the archives. Both full of uncertainty and ambiguity, the historical sources reflect rapidly changing historical conditions.

Even if the region’s revolutionary activity assumed fluid and fleeting forms,

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<sup>35</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo năm 1948 của UBKCHC Sơn-Lai,” 15 Jan 1949, phòng PTTg (1945-54), NAVC 3, file no. 78, p. 26, 29.

<sup>36</sup> Was this a typo or a different person? Cầm Trọng’s description seems to match Cầm Văn Dung: “a famous person whom all classes of the Northwest, especially for the Thái people at the time expected great things from...” (1978), 533.

<sup>37</sup> In August 1948, the 5<sup>th</sup> Cadre Conference issued an order regarding the “united national front” calling for the creation of “Offices of Mountain Nations (*Phòng Quốc dân miền núi*) to assist compatriots in more practical ways, to open the path for training cadres in montane regions of Thái, Mường, etc.” The order also called for, “local government to include all class strata of the mountain nations.” Đảng Lao động Việt Nam, *Văn kiện của Đảng về Chính sách dân tộc* (Hanoi: NXB Sự thật, 1965), 29-31.

the DRV's administrative orders did appear to reshape institutional structures and spatial configurations. The October 1947 administrative reforms led in June 1948 to the establishment of the Son La-Lai Châu Inter-province Resistance and Administrative Committee. As an administrative unit, the Son-Lai Committee reported to the President's Office, Ministry of Defense, and Ministry of Interior. As a military unit, the Committee worked closely with the encompassing Military Interzone (*Liên Khu*). The Interzone's command included Regiment 148 (*Trung đoàn 148*) whose 600 soldiers had arrived in late December 1945 to support Son La's uprising.<sup>38</sup> Over the years, both Interzones and Committees changed frequently in terms of names, spatial expanse, leadership composition, and base location.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, this pattern of overlapping military and civilian spatial jurisdictions established an enduring organizational pattern, forming the first two legs of a tri-partite institutional structure.<sup>40</sup>

Adding a third leg to these military Interzones and civilian Committees, the ICP erected a parallel, secret command. Officially, President Hồ Chí Minh in November 1945 declared the dissolution of the ICP in order to broaden the DRV government's appeal and to conform with united front policy. Only in 1951 did the Party appear publicly—and in different guise—to lead a statist anti-colonial movement. In the interim, the ICP was referred to cryptically as the “Organization” and worked clandestinely to steer political developments, personnel recruitment, and

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<sup>38</sup> Bộ chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 63.

<sup>39</sup> In October 1945 the Government divided all of Vietnam into War Zones (*Chiến khu*) and split provinces of northwest Tonkin between two: Sơn La and Lai Châu under Warzone 1; Yên Bái and Lào Cai under Warzone 2. In Oct 1946, the Regional Committee for the Northern Salient (*Bắc Bộ*) reshuffled the warzones but left these four provinces divided among two different spheres. On 25 Jan 1948 the Government consolidated the four provinces under the larger Interzone 10 (X). In Oct 1949, the Party Central Committee merged the two larger Warzones into the Việt Bắc Interzone. On 17 July 1952, the Party Central Committee split the four provinces from the Việt Bắc to form the Northwest Zone (Khu Tây Bắc, aka Khu XX). Cao Văn Lương et al, *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân Khu Tây Bắc* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 2003), 20-21.

<sup>40</sup> This overlap persisted through the American war in spaces that later, beginning in 1975, became a unitary Socialist Republic of Vietnam.



decision-making.<sup>41</sup> At its “center,” the Party’s organizational structure mirrored that of the military: the Party’s Central Executive Committee (*Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng*) matched the military’s Central Command. Regional Party Committees (*khu ủy*) matched frequent administrative changes in the military Zones and Interzones. At provincial and subordinate units, Party organization shifted to mirror civil administration. By observing this principal of parallelism, the Party developed hierarchical organizations to recruit, staff, and influence leadership positions in rapidly evolving civil and military bureaucracies.<sup>42</sup>

Party leaders in Sơn La and Lai Châu formed organizations rapidly between 1946 and 1949. The Việt Minh delegation that arrived in Sơn La in October 1945 included Dương Văn Ty, a senior delegate from the Party’s Central Committee.<sup>43</sup> In June 1946, the Central Committee delegated Trần Quyết to replace Dương Văn Ty and to create a Provincial Party Chapter (*Tỉnh ủy*). In October 1946, he founded the Sơn La Party Committee (*Đảng bộ*) and gleaned members from Regiment 148’s own Party organization. Because the Thái Federation controlled Lai Châu more firmly, Party organizations developed there more slowly. Three years after a unit formed in Sơn La, the Interzone 10 Party Committee founded the Lai Châu Provincial Leadership Council (*Ban cán sự tỉnh*) chaired by Trần Quốc Mạnh. In December 1949, he and his two fellow council members established the Lai Châu Party Cell (*chi bộ*).<sup>44</sup> Both Sơn La’s and Lai Châu’s Party organizations ran parallel to the Sơn-Lai Committee and the military Interzone. Institutional missions, spatial jurisdictions, and leadership

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<sup>41</sup> Kenneth MacLean, “The Arts of Disclosure: Peasant-Bureaucrats, Historiography, and State Socialism in Viet Nam,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2005), xv-xx; Dang Phong and Melanie Beresford, *Authority Relations and Economic Decision-Making in Vietnam* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1998), 23-24.

<sup>42</sup> Cf., Bernard B. Fall, *The Viet Minh Regime: Government and Administration in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1956), 39-47.

<sup>43</sup> Bộ chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 55-56.

<sup>44</sup> Ban nghiên cứu Lịch sử Đảng Lai Châu (1980), 23-25.

overlapped: Trần Quyết, for example, served as the Son-Lai Committee's Vice-Chair as well as the Interzone's senior Party official.<sup>45</sup>

From a forward base area in Yên Bái, the Son-Lai Committee became the DRV's senior regional authority, charged with administering its territory, government, and population and overseeing what its members called the inter-province's "Resistance Administration apparatus." Specifically, the Son-Lai Committee was responsible for coordinating subordinate Resistance and Administrative Committees modeled on downstream territorial units in districts (*huyện*) and communes (*xã*); supervising specialized line agencies (*ty chuyên môn*), such as postal services and police work; coordinating military affairs; shepherding and housing refugee populations; and reporting on local conditions to superiors in the Việt Bắc. As a clearing house for implementing orders from "above" and reporting on conditions "below," the Son-Lai Committee's archived records provide a revealing vantage point.

As with other regional institutions at this time, the personnel who composed the Son-Lai Committee changed frequently but their backgrounds nonetheless indicate the sustained power of Thái elites. In 1948 and 1949, Xa Văn Minh of Mộc Châu emerged as the Committee's Chair. Vice-Chair Trần Quyết was one of two explicitly "Kinh" representatives, another of whom, Nguyễn Ba Toàn, managed military affairs. Aside from Xa Văn Minh, "local Mountain" representatives included Lò Văn San, Diêu (Đèo?) Chinh Tho, and Lò Văn Mười.<sup>46</sup> After Trần Quyết, first Xa Văn Minh and then Lò Văn Mười—two Thái elites and former leaders of the Sơn La revolt—signed off on Committee reports. Now recognized as DRV government officials, these

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<sup>45</sup> Sa Văn Minh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Letter from UBKCHC Liên Khu 10 to Văn Phòng Chủ tịch Chính Phủ, 5 June 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 654; Sa Văn Minh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78; Lò Văn Mười, "Báo cáo 3 tháng 1,2,3 năm 1949 của UBKCHC Liên tỉnh Sơn La Lai Châu," 5 April 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187; Lò Văn Mười, "Báo cáo..." 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187.

*muang* leaders and regional representatives traveled back and forth to the Việt Bắc base area. Thái elites worked with, and helped create, enmeshed institutions—i.e., military, government, and Party organizations—to lead opposition to the Thái Federation.

### ***Guerilla spaces and activities***

Between 1948 and 1951, these evolving and enmeshed organizations attempted to destabilize the Thái Federation, to establish contact with oppositional groups, and to organize a viable alternative government. Beginning in 1948, armed propaganda units (*đội tuyên truyền vũ trang*) moved into Federation territory and positioned themselves as the vanguard of a growing revolutionary presence. Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp intended these guerilla units to use weapons for self-defense only and to emphasize political agitation over armed confrontation.<sup>47</sup> Composed of 116 soldiers and political cadres, the Determined Advance Forward Unit (*Đội xung phong Quyết tiến*) was the largest of four such units operating in the region, all of which fell under Regiment 148's command.<sup>48</sup> Part of an ICP program to infiltrate “enemy” territory in northwest Tonkin and Laos, these units attempted to expand the spatial scope and broaden the social appeal of a revolutionary movement.

That the armed propaganda units operated fluidly across the Lao-Viet border points to how senior military and Party leaders initially conceived of anti-colonial warfare across the frame of Indochina as a whole. At its Fourth Central Executive Committee Conference held in April 1948, the ICP decided to “expand the battlefield

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<sup>47</sup> Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1986), 30-31; Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982), 281-282.

<sup>48</sup> Bộ chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 65; Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ Huyện Điện Biên (2005), 52; Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm (1979), 144.

into Cambodia and Laos.”<sup>49</sup> Shortly thereafter, in May 1948, the military’s Central Command established a “Lao-North [Vietnam] Forward Council.” The Central Command ordered Interzone 10’s commanders to establish a base area in Mộc Châu and to create “footholds” across the border—ostensibly for their Lao allies. The Lào-Bắc Forward Council worked with the Sơn-Lai Committee to build and coordinate organizations straddling the border.<sup>50</sup> Ranging from Mộc Châu, the four armed propaganda units spread south through the Lao province of Sam Neua and followed the borderline west by northwest through Phong Sa Lý and back into Điện Biên.<sup>51</sup>

Because of its position on the Lao border, Điện Biên emerged as an early target; armed propaganda units quickly moved to recruit highland populations there. In 1948-1949, these units moved in almost mirror-like opposition to the colonial alliance. Whereas the Federation occupied the plains and sought support among valley-dwelling Thái peoples, armed propaganda units roamed in the highlands, making contact with and recruiting among Hmong and Dao peoples.<sup>52</sup> By late 1949, the ICP’s Lai Châu Provincial Leadership Council felt emboldened to dispatch work teams (*đội công tác*) to the districts of Điện Biên, Tuần Giáo, and Quỳnh Nhai. In these forward areas, workteams followed up on advances made by the armed propaganda units in the highlands and began seeking “footholds” in the lowlands.<sup>53</sup> In mid-1950, the Lai Châu Council moved from Than Uyên district, Yên Bái province to new headquarters in Tuần Giáo where they aimed to oversee a rising movement’s westward expansion.<sup>54</sup>

At its Third National Conference in early 1950, the ICP once again confirmed its military commitment to Indochina as a whole. They attempted to counter the

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<sup>49</sup> “Nghị quyết Hội nghị cán bộ Trung ương lần thứ IV (Miền bắc Đông Dương),” *Văn kiện Đảng* vol. 9 year 1948 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2001), 95-139.

<sup>50</sup> The Council was called “Ban xung phong Lào-Bắc.” Bộ chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 99.

<sup>51</sup> Bộ chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 99-100.

<sup>52</sup> Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ Huyện Điện Biên (2005), 51-56.

<sup>53</sup> Ban nghiên cứu Lịch sử Đảng bộ Lai Châu (1980), 26.

<sup>54</sup> Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ Huyện Điện Biên (2005), 68.

recently created, French-backed national monarchies in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam through a coordinated strategy of waging war in Indochina broadly.<sup>55</sup> “In this war of resistance,” the ICP’s resolution declared, “all of Indochina is a single battlefield.”<sup>56</sup> Notably, the resolution assumed that Vietnamese cadres would remain in leadership positions until the time they deemed Lao and Cambodian counterparts sufficiently trained to take their place.<sup>57</sup> Behind the Party’s unified transnational front, in other words, lay a dominant *national* elite directing militant anti-colonial activities.

In terms of guerilla tactics, the coercive program included assassinations, economic sabotage, and disrupting communication and transport. Armed propaganda units worked with regular soldiers (i.e., Regiment 148), forward police units (*Công an xung phong*), and irregular militias (*dân quân*). Militia members, recruited from Front organizations, reached 2000 irregulars by mid-1949.<sup>58</sup> Among others, assassinations included murdering two of Bạc Cầm Quý’s siblings as well as the killing of other “important traitors” (*Việt gian quan trọng*), such as Xa Van Nuc and Xa Kim Tien on 12 August 1948.<sup>59</sup> In mid-1949, a military offensive into Mường La and Mai Sơn resulted in wounding Sơn La’s Province Chief and his wife.<sup>60</sup> Economic sabotage included destroying Federation rice granaries as well as encouraging farmers to delay debt repayment and refrain from supplying the “enemy.”<sup>61</sup>

Disrupting, displacing, and replacing lines of communication and transport

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<sup>55</sup> Motoo Furuta, “The Indochina Communist Party’s Division into Three Parties: Vietnamese Communist Policy towards Cambodia and Laos, 1948-1951,” in Takashi Shiraishi and Furuta, eds., *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992), 152.

<sup>56</sup> Furuta (1992), 151. Cf., “Nghị Quyết của Hội nghị Toàn quốc lần thứ ba,” 21 Jan to 3 Feb 1950, *Văn Kiện Đảng* vol 11 year 1950 (2001), 197-219.

<sup>57</sup> Furuta (1992), 152.

<sup>58</sup> Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo UBKCHC LT Sơn Lai 3 tháng 7,8,9 năm 1949,” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 18.

<sup>59</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo ba tháng 7, 8, 9 năm 1948,” 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 2; Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 26.

<sup>61</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 23; Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 9.

indicate early attempts to wrest control over the boundaries regulating upstream and downstream exchange. By staging ambushes and blockading roads, guerilla forces were able to force the Thái Federation to rely increasingly on French aircraft for transport and resupply.<sup>62</sup> By mid-1949, they had effectively shut down the principal water (Black River) and road routes linking the mountains to colonial strongholds located in old downstream market centers of Hòa Bình and Hanoi. Road travel was limited to one route, known in French as the “Piste Pavie,” between Sơn La and Lai Châu. These road closures forced the Federation and its French allies to rely even more heavily on air-based travel and transport.<sup>63</sup> Meanwhile, the DRV and its military met its growing needs for transportation and materiel by overland routes. Increased demand on the east-west route through Yên Bái to and from the Việt-Bắc base area led the Sơn Lai Committee to request another north-south road be opened through Interzone 4 to Thanh Hoá.<sup>64</sup> This latter route would become a primary means of supply during the 1953-54 Điện Biên Phủ Campaign.

Just as they destabilized the Thái Federation, these soldiers and cadres endeavored to build an alternative government within “liberated” zones among a population committed to “struggle” (*đấu tranh*). In 1949, the Sơn Lai Committee reported the establishment of temporary Popular Assemblies as well as Administrative and Resistance Committees in the districts (*huyện*) of Mường La and Mai Sơn and their subordinate communes (*xã*). Each commune committee, ideally, included a chair, vice chair, secretary, military officer in charge of militia, and someone responsible for both provisioning the military and maintaining communications; in practice, one representative often performed multiple functions.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 10, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> The request followed defeat of French forces at Kéo Le and Cầm Cút in Thanh Hoá. Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 21, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 12-14.

These committees appealed to popular legitimacy by institutionalizing an alternative to the increasingly unpopular Thái Federation. After conducting field inspections in June 1949 with Trần Quyết, Lò Văn Mười observed that, with the establishment of district and commune offices, the masses appeared “happy” with their representation in local government. Without these representatives, he said, the masses would “only know the sibling cadres of the Viet Minh Front and the military.”<sup>66</sup>

### *Vast area, sparsely peopled*

In mid-1949, shortly after establishing administrative committees in “liberated” districts of Mường La and Mai Sơn, a revealing expression appears in the DRV’s official correspondence. In a report to his superiors, Thái cadre Lò Văn Mười charted the Sơn-Lai Committee’s progress towards crafting territorial administrative units and staffing them with suitable personnel. He requested “organized transport” to facilitate the Committee’s visits to, and inspections of, newly formed districts and communes. “The geographic scale of one commune in Sơn La Province [where] the area is vast and sparsely peopled,” he explained, is such that, “one commune is as spacious as one or two districts below downstream.”<sup>67</sup>

Lò Văn Mười’s invocation of “vast land, sparse people” prefigures representations of, and relations of domination in, a region that was becoming a frontier all over again under rapidly evolving historical circumstances. Lò Văn Mười was doing more than just asking for a car or an armed escort. He was also legitimating his own powerful position by referencing his knowledge of local conditions relative to downstream areas of “Vietnam.” The content and directionality of his request point to

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<sup>66</sup> He reported the Front enjoyed strong “prestige among the masses” such that, as of June, affiliated National Salvation organizations claimed 6,000 members. *Ibid.* p. 14, 19.

<sup>67</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 42.

a developing relationship between Thái powerbrokers and an ascendant, Kinh-dominated political center. His reasoning and very language point also to an emerging discourse, one based on and formative of this same relationship.

What did the expression “vast land, sparse people” mean? Certainly, the phrase captures something of this hinterland’s observed conditions where, approximately, an average of 20 people settled a square kilometer. Yet, to be meaningful, the Sơn Lai terrain could only be “vast” and its population “sparse” in comparison with some other referent, one Lò Văn Mười located explicitly “below downstream” (*dưới Xuôi*). He referred implicitly to the Red River Delta, where upwards of 800 people squeezed onto a square kilometer and, according to a popular expression, “land was tight, people densely settled” (*đất chặt người đông*).

In some ways, this was an odd comparison. Populated with wet-rice farmers and few if any swidden cultivators, the Red River Delta’s Kinh/Viet population practiced cultural conventions still uncommon in the Black River region. For example, few highland peoples could speak, much less read or write, the Vietnamese language in which this phrase was recorded. Contemporary Laos, by contrast, had a ratio of land to people similar, if not even more “sparse,” than population densities in Sơn Lai’s bailiwick. Moreover, Laos displayed many more commonalities in terms of shared languages, ecologies, agricultural practices, as well as ongoing trade and kinship relations. The very oddity of the phrase’s comparative referent highlights a spatial orientation guiding evolving relations of rule.

What did the expression do? Discursively, the phrase performed ideological work towards constituting a singular region (re)located in spatializing relations of power. As one among a coterie of local Thái elites working with a rising DRV, Lò Văn Mười figured in a powerful process, one that remade a malleable, indeterminate space into a bounded region fixed in larger relations of spatialized domination. The



late 1940s presented conditions similar to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: once again, multiple and competing power centers claimed the Black River region. At this juncture, however, Lò Văn Mười recognized territorial borders in order to relocate this space as a “unified” region within Vietnam. It was a region he and other Thái elites like him claimed to represent. He wrote of the local population,

Among all strata of the Mountain compatriots like Thái, Mường, Mán [Dao], Mèo [Hmong], Puộc, Xá [Khumu], there is still one heart loyal to the government proving unity among them. We are paying the most attention to the Mán [Dao] and Mèo [Hmong] compatriots, who during the French period did not have to do corvée or supply [the military] like the Thái or Mường; these days these compatriots do have to provision and labor but not as though the regime forced them, and they are still happy to follow orders from above.<sup>68</sup>

Lò Văn Mười’s use of “unity” to describe the Black River’s population reveals and conceals manifold tensions. Note the slippage describing “Mountain compatriots”: if “all strata” were truly “unified,” then why distinguish among them? Indeed, any attempt to describe such multiple and wayward social groups as “unified” must be regarded skeptically and understood as an ideological claim. In fact, the statement above contains reasons to postulate conditions of *dis*-unity. First, he represented “the government” that had reversed colonial precedent and now expected Dao and Hmong peoples to labor and provision on its behalf. Second, in spite of supposed “happiness” among Hmong and Dao peoples to comply with orders from “above,” the regional Committee nonetheless monitored compliance. If they were truly happy to obey, then why suspect them of disobedience?

Moreover, at this historical juncture, any “unity” among and between Black River peoples was patently false, for the following reasons. French forces fought the revolutionary army. The Thái Federation controlled Lai Châu and much of Sơn La.

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<sup>68</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19-20.

DRV cadres, elite Tháis, and Việt Minh organizers violently opposed the Federation, particularly in Sơn La and Yên Bái. All over, poor peasants did the hard work officially recognized *muang* leaders commanded of them. Finally, Dao and Hmong peoples appeared to be suspicious of Thái power—whatever its form.

Within a re-emergent frontier remained old, multiple, scattered frontiers. Indeed, Thái peoples—Black or White—were only some among many social groups in this region, not all of whom accepted their (fractured) rule as legitimate. In the hills and mountains surrounding valley-based *muang* units lived another panoply of social groups, some of whom aspired to alternative forms of rule. Like the idiom “of vast area, sparse people,” the claim to “unity” naturalizes an emerging relationship in bifurcated *national* terms of peripheral region and rising center—between mountains and delta, upstream and downstream—that disguised manifold, and hotly contested, social differences.

Over time, the terms of “vast area, sparse people” came to be a dominant representation and the Vietnamese language a means for expressing it.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps in ways he did not foresee, Lò Văn Mười reproduced a discourse with concrete and lasting ramifications: a frontier region located on the edge of rising state power and defined in terms of its cultural difference with respect to the center’s population. Over its long life in official reports and nationalist histories, “vast area, sparse people” emerged as a frontier discourse, an oft-repeated refrain to describe and prescribe different state projects reflective of historically-mutable relationships and priorities. By projecting an idea of a unitary frontier, the discursive idiom denied the multiplicity of peoples inhabiting distinct spaces traveling along an uncertain historical

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<sup>69</sup> The phrase appears as, “Đất rộng người ít,” or “vast land, few people” in UBKCHC Liên tỉnh Sơn-Lai, “Báo cáo 6 tháng đầu năm 1950,” 1950, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-50), file no. 309, p. 5. Echoing an underlying geographic determinism, Cầm Trọng writes, “...this region of high mountains, full of obstacles and difficult of access, where land is vast and people sparse, made for a very complex people, a society that developed very slowly” (1978), 517.

trajectory—sometimes together, sometimes apart.

It was no accident that this ideologically-loaded description of “upstream” conditions appeared when it did. One estimate places the total population in Sơn La’s growing “liberated zones” at 25,000 people.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the struggle in 1948 for Sơn La’s southern tier had created “wide and growing space” for DRV government, leading the Sơn Lai Committee in January 1949 to request an influx of cadres trained in “resistance administration.”<sup>71</sup> Cadres came bearing instructions codified in a pair of Presidential Decrees dated 19 November 1948 (SL-CTN 254 & 255) which specified the composition and function of administrative committees and popular assemblies organized as province, district, and commune.<sup>72</sup> In April 1949, Lò Văn Mười reported that communes in districts of Mai Sơn and Mộc Châu had yet to implement the decrees, in part blaming a lack of paper for election ballots.<sup>73</sup> After conducting inspection tours in June 1949 of Mường La, Mộc Châu, and Mai Sơn, Lò Văn Mười deployed a curious kind of double-speak. His conclusion invoking the region’s “vast area, sparse people,” followed—in the same report—a confirmation that each commune had organized assemblies and committees “completely” and a reservation that “not even one” conformed to the laws.<sup>74</sup> What was happening on the ground?

It appears that the regional Committee’s attempt to implement Decrees 254 and 255 generated revealing problems regarding the units and shapes of territorial administration as well as the personnel to staff them. What was, and what should be, the fundamental unit for organizing local government? On the one hand, regional

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<sup>70</sup> Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 103.

<sup>71</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 29.

<sup>72</sup> 254/SL-CTN (19/11/48) “Sắc lệnh tổ chức lại chính quyền nhân dân trong thời kỳ kháng chiến”; 255/SL-CTN (19/11/48) “Sắc lệnh ấn định cách tổ chức và cách làm việc của HĐND và UBND trong vùng tạm thời bị địch kiểm soát hoặc uy hiếp.” Accessed 6 Jun 2008 at <http://www.chinhphu.vn>.

<sup>73</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 14, 29.

leaders interpreted the center's decrees as orders, "to organize a people's local government in our country only as far as the commune," i.e. not allowing for village leadership.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, people in these "upstream" areas were accustomed to different and more numerous organizational forms: one "commune" featured multiple subunits, from *lông* (?) to *bản* (mountain village) to *xóm* (neighborhood). Furthermore, settlement patterns displayed remarkable diversity: villages ranged from a low of several households up to six dozen; households might be packed densely together or spread hither and yon across the landscape. Organizing communes reproduced underlying settlement diversity (from 20 to 200 villages) and distances between them (30 kilometers from the nearest office) which, in turn, compromised the ability of commune-based local government to function as intended.

French administrators had addressed these problems by recognizing the village unit, and village heads (*tạo bản*), as the fundamental form of local government. The multiple subunits, *lông* and *xóm*, worked to close the distance between scattered villages. The Son Lai leadership therefore faced a difficult choice. "If we dismiss the person responsible for the village," rued Lò Văn Mươi, "then we either follow the decree and work will not happen; or we do not dismiss them and we violate the government's decree."

"Even more difficult" than this village issue, he continued, were problems encountered in administering highland spaces and peoples, in areas identified as Hmong and Dao. Recall that, historically, these peoples had settled the slopes, ridgelines, and mountaintops between and amidst Thái settlements. French colonial administrators had used a principal of proximity to form spatially uniform and contiguous administrative units with their adjoining communities. By including Dao

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<sup>75</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the following discussion draws from Lò Văn Mươi, "Báo cáo..." 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 14-15.

and Hmong settlements in units dominated by Thái and Mường peoples, colonial administration reproduced the *muang* in modern guise. The reorganization of local government offered highland peoples opportunity to express both discontent with Thái domination and “aspirations” to form an alternative. In one district, Hmong and Dao peoples “proclaimed” their own ethnically distinct communes, creating patchy units connecting villages upwards of 100 km apart. Their unorthodox decision—creating a spatially non-contiguous unit—allowed for peoples linked by social commonalities (trade, language, kinship, etc.) to achieve democratic representation. For Lò Văn Mươi and others in the Son Lai Committee, however, the spontaneous recreation of communes linking distant settlements once again raised what he felt was the underlying problem of village administration. “To dismiss the village head,” rued the administrative representative, “makes work very hard.”

The Son Lai Committee thus faced a difficult choice: either adhere to the Central Government’s regulations ordering the abolishment of village government and dismissal of village heads; or follow a functioning, popularly supported administrative precedent with long historical roots recognizing village leadership. To follow orders jeopardized official work, “especially among the Mountain people,” or Hmong and Dao groups, explained Lò Văn Mươi, “because geographical conditions are such that people in these villages only know the person in charge of their village.” In other words, the Committee could ill afford to alienate trusted local leadership. The sources are unclear whether or not village leadership remained in place as before. What is clear is that these parties reached a compromise. Officially, the Son-Lai Committee recognized no “village government.” Yet they allowed for each Commune Administrative Committee to employ local “assistants” responsible for the everyday work of corresponding between village and commune.

According to the regional Committee’s assessments, these early attempts at

creating an “administrative apparatus” (*bộ máy hành chính*) or “local government” (*chính quyền*) all failed because they did not conform with centrally issued decrees. Yet, what may have appeared a failure, I argue, was the result of negotiations between multiple groups as to the appropriate scale and shape of a territorializing, hierarchically-organized form of rule. These negotiations called into question underlying assumptions and powerful norms guiding the construction of spatially-delineated administrative units. For peoples accustomed to, or chafing under, historic Thái patterns of *bản-muang* settlement and domination, the remaking of territorial units offered opportunity to question spatial administration and allocation of office. For the Dao and Hmong above, the normative construction of territorial units as spatially uniform and contiguous made little sense and, worse, risked diluting their representative power. They posed a solution that linked villages together according to social commonality and shared settlement altitude.<sup>76</sup>

These debates and negotiations regarding the administration of “vast” space raised another question. With such a “sparse” population, who was qualified to staff and steer newly created government offices? Regional leaders interpreted incomplete implementation of Decree 254 to mean, “representatives at districts and communes are all short of capacities; among them are commune representatives who cannot read *quốc ngữ*,” or Romanized Vietnamese. The language of capacities (*năng lực*) indicated a general assessment of skills that could be learned. To this end, the Viet Minh Front had already organized literacy teams (*Bình dân học vụ*) to teach peasants Vietnamese, the language of revolutionary solidarity and emerging bureaucracy. By contrast, Lò Văn Mười’s report reserved particular evaluations for “Mountain People”

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<sup>76</sup> I interpret their actions as assertions of alternative sovereignty. Likewise, James Scott argues that “modern concepts of sovereignty make little sense in this setting.” Dao and Hmong settlement patterns took advantage of topographical relief to assert what he calls “degrees of potential sovereignty and cultural autonomy.” *The Art of Not being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 54-58.

who were, supposedly, “culturally insufficient” and “hygienically backwards.”<sup>77</sup> This second evaluation, presumably of Hmong and Dao peoples among others, recalls a culturalist language of civility and savagery specific to Thái ideas of *muang*-based, wet rice settlement and its opposite, a realm of swiddeners in a wild untamed forest.<sup>78</sup>

His remarks speak to a pattern. Regional DRV leaders, Thái and Kinh alike, decided that the local population for reasons of education or culture, respectively, was either not yet qualified or fully unqualified to lead itself. Reflecting on local “command” capacity in 1948, Xa Văn Minh in January 1949 approved of province leaders yet rated commune leadership “lacking” and requested the assistance of more Việt Minh cadres.<sup>79</sup> In mid-1949, Lò Văn Mười repeated the disparaging appraisal of commune leadership and expanded his predecessor’s request in more culturally specific language: he asked for one cadre from “downstream” (*dưới Xuôi*) to sit on each province and district committee.<sup>80</sup>

Cadres (*cán bộ*) led everyday forms of state formation in revolutionary and early independent Vietnam. Technically, cadres were trained individuals directly employed by the Party or state in an official capacity.<sup>81</sup> Yet all cadres were not the same. Just as local cadres (*cán bộ địa phương*) were deprecated in terms of their capacities and/or culture, “downstream cadres” were exalted in terms of their knowledge, skills, and “high degree of culture.” As noted above, two seats on the Son-Lai Committee were occupied by, and reserved for, “ethnic Kinh.” The mid-1949 report rated the “capabilities” of these “downstream people” (Trần Quyết and Nguyễn Ba Toàn) as “relatively higher” than those of the “Mountain people” (Sa Văn Minh,

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<sup>77</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 24, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew Turton, “Introduction,” in Turton, ed., *Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000), 3-33.

<sup>79</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 19.

<sup>80</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 30.

<sup>81</sup> On training content, cf., Michael P. Mau, “The Training of Cadres in the Lao Dong Party of North Vietnam, 1960-1967,” *Asian Survey* 9(1969), 281-296. On the peasant bureaucrat, cf., MacLean (2005).

Lò Văn San, and Lò Văn Mười)—all rated “so-so.”<sup>82</sup> Whether referred to as “Kinh” or “downstream” cadres, they enjoyed prestige among regional and central officials not only for their learned administrative skills but also for allegedly intrinsic superior cultural attributes.

The discussion of cadres indicates a real or potential convergence between Thái and Kinh ideas of civility and savagery. When Lò Văn Mười requested “downstream cadres,” he specified three tasks: first, to “scrub all representatives of Mountain people [so they] know how to work”; second, “to lead official business and specialized agencies”; third, “to learn how to improve peoples’ livelihoods.”<sup>83</sup> The Sơn Lai Committee reserved a privileged role for Kinh cadres to staff the rising state structure, to instruct locals in statecraft, and to “improve the hygiene” among peoples whom Thái elites and Kinh alike conceived as akin to dirty hillbillies.

Kinh cadres remained in short supply, however, because itinerant “downstream” cadres were reluctant to make the journey “upstream.” This was an old problem, not unique to anti-colonial organizing. From at least the Nguyễn dynasty through French rule, Kinh officials considered the mountains to be a punishment post and an “unhealthy” place, owing in part to prevalent malaria.<sup>84</sup> In the late 1940s, reasons cited for not going to the mountains ranged from a reluctance to separate from families, to difficulties adjusting to the weather, to problems maintaining one’s health. Indeed, of the Kinh cadres who did make the journey, many either quit or promptly fell ill with fevers (most likely malarial).<sup>85</sup> Kinh cadres, in other words, feared and fled

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<sup>82</sup> Điều Chinh Thọ’s capabilities received a grade of “unclear.” Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 32.

<sup>83</sup> The Committee requested Kinh cadres, literally, to “scrub” or “wash” (*giặt giũ*) the “representatives of Mountain people” indicating a low regard—shared by Thái and Kinh alike—for their “compatriots.” Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” year 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 30.

<sup>84</sup> Emmanuel Poisson, “Unhealthy air of the mountains: *Kinh* and ethnic minority rule on the Sino-Vietnamese frontier from the fifteenth to the twentieth century,” in Martin Gainsborough, ed., *On the Borders of State Power* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 12-24.

<sup>85</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 2, 5; Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19, 41.



from the very same conditions they were supposed to improve.

In sum, the discourse of “vast area, sparse people” reveals emerging relationships between Thái and Kinh leaders positioning themselves as leaders of region and center, respectively. The discourse also works to obscure the Black River region’s manifold social differences as well as differential power and knowledge at multiple scales. The rapid construction of administrative structures both reproduced and initiated enduring problems of rule. Just as new districts and communes spread along Sơn La’s southern tier among Thái *muang*-based populations and recognized their hereditary leadership, the highlands above and between them remained spaces apart.<sup>86</sup> Strategies to organize this region according to models developed elsewhere in “Vietnam” could only partially and temporarily overcome the models’ poor fit with local settlement patterns and traditions of rule. Meanwhile, local partisans challenged leaders to modify and adapt a program developed elsewhere, according to norms suited to a lowland, Kinh/Viet spatial and social context. Emerging from these different perspectives was a debate regarding issues of spatial regulation, personnel recruitment, and culture-bound logics. Alternately convergent and divergent conceptions of spatialized and ethnicized rule foreshadowed a much longer, and ongoing, process of negotiating relations of domination on a re-emergent frontier.

### ***The revolutionary exchange, or salt and power***

Peasant hunger and its alleviation were closely linked to Việt Minh organizing and to the institutionalization and legitimation of DRV power. During the Great Famine of 1945, mass starvation led to the death of an estimated 1-2 million people in

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<sup>86</sup> “In the Sơn-Lai Interprovince there is *only* the Việt Minh Front operating and developing fast among the Mèo [Hmong], Mán [Dao], and Mường ethnicities.” Italics added. Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19. I interpret this statement to indicate that montane spaces lacked administrative and representative organizations present in Thái *muang*.

the Red River Delta and in adjoining provinces of Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An. “No disaster of this magnitude,” writes historian David Marr, “had afflicted Vietnamese society in living memory.”<sup>87</sup> In contrast to the ignorance and ineptitude of French administrators and occupying Japanese forces, the Việt Minh Front emerged as the only organization willing to alleviate famine conditions or even able to understand its political implications.<sup>88</sup>

On 2 September 1945, in his Declaration of Independence of the DRV, Hồ Chí Minh cited the famine as evidence of how “our people” had suffered under the “double yoke” of French colonialism and Japanese fascism. Turning paternalist colonial rhetoric on its head, the famine, he observed wryly, demonstrated France’s incapacity to “‘protect’ us.”<sup>89</sup> For DRV leaders assisted in the field by Việt Minh organizers and emergent agencies, ensuring adequate supplies of food and preventing hunger became an unstable linchpin on which hung a shared claim to popular legitimacy.

The Black River region’s politicized economy presents a fascinating example of these complex processes at work. As discussed below, providing food was never an exercise in one-way charity: rather, revolutionary agents and agitators engaged peasants in a complex process of reciprocal exchange. When Việt Minh organizations and emerging DRV institutions provided scarce materials, their agents worked both symbolically to legitimize their power and organizationally to institutionalize evolving relationships. By accepting these goods, peasants entered into a relationship in which

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<sup>87</sup> Even the low-end estimate meant that, in affected areas of Tonkin and Annam, about 10 percent of the population perished over 5 months in early 1945. Marr (1995), 96-107. Marr provides overview of the famine, including its causes, consequences, and psychological toll on survivors. MacLean discusses its contested memory in contemporary accounts, historical writing, and memorials (2005) 27-75.

<sup>88</sup> Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982), 299-302; Hy V. Luong, *Revolution in the Village* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 137-139.

<sup>89</sup> Ho Chi Minh, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, Selected Writings, 1920-66*, ed. Bernard Fall (New York: Signet, 1968), 141-143.

their loyalty and support were expected in return. Over time, the evolving DRV state and its military also called on its junior exchange partners, or emerging subjects, for more than just recognizing their power as legitimate: they claimed, in addition, peasant resources, particularly their labor and food. Although reciprocal, the relations made and unmade through this exchange were uneven, contingent, and, often, highly contested.

In late 1940s northwest Tonkin, warfare between competing state-making projects led to a deteriorating economy. The Son Lai Committee's first archived report from July 1948 provides a snapshot of difficult conditions and a footloose population. In areas controlled by the Thái Federation, farmwork had come to a "standstill" because of labor shortages: men were forced to work off-farm to supply the military, work as *corvée*, or serve as soldiers; the "enemy" killed water buffalo, wasting meat and draft labor. Imported goods like salt, knives, tobacco, and medicine were available only from "westerners" and at grossly inflated prices, rendering staples unaffordable luxuries. Above all, salt was so scarce that "people say they have not seen a single scoop for three or four months." In short, the people in "enemy occupied areas" were "hungry and miserable." In "free areas," where the Son Lai Committee claimed control, conditions were only marginally better: only about one-third the population had enough corn and rice to feed themselves, yet even these fortunate few still supplemented their diet with forest tubers.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, these conditions appealed to people "fed up" with heavy Federation labor requirements, prompting some to cross over into Son-Lai zones where people were "happier and more comfortable." In the midst of these contests and combat, some chose not to choose sides: people "everywhere" either hid out in forest hollows and lived hand to mouth; or they left

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<sup>90</sup> Consumption of forest tubers indicates severe food shortage. As elsewhere in Southeast Asia, they are a hunger food (loaded with starch), a last resort once other more desirable staples have been depleted.

house and livestock behind to start all over again in Laos.<sup>91</sup>

This report, like any archival document produced by and for state, must be read critically. Descriptions of conditions in either “enemy occupied territory” or “free zones,” as these value-laden terms indicate, may be self-serving. Although the alleged labor conditions, food shortages, and high prices do appear consistent with Thái Federation policies and their outcomes, the Federation alone was not responsible for creating difficulties among the broader population.<sup>92</sup> Rather, food shortages and high commodity prices stemmed, in part, from ongoing guerilla actions intended to “sabotage the economy,” or disrupt trade, obstruct transport, and torch “enemy” granaries.<sup>93</sup> Both sides resorted to force which must have disrupted the agricultural calendar, displaced farmers from their fields, reduced crop production, and contributed to wide-spread hunger.

Given shared responsibility for conditions of scarcity, what accounted for socially-recognized differences—however marginal—between two zones claimed by armed opponents? Notwithstanding those peasants who fled to Laos or went into hiding, why did people move from Federation to Son Lai territory and not the other way around? Why, in spite of ongoing labor and food shortages, did peasants go on to provide labor and provisions *willingly* to agencies of the Son Lai Committee and allied military forces?

The same report from mid-1948 that notes preferable conditions in emerging DRV territory, and their social recognition as such, hints also at an explanation—salt

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<sup>91</sup> Trần Quyết, “Báo cáo tháng 6 năm 1948,” 20 July 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 4.

<sup>92</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, neocolonial rule reproduced feudal relations in the valley *muang*. Thái lords, ensconced as Federation officials, called on bonded labor to farm “official” land and required young “free” men to work as corvée on roadcrews or soldiers in the Thái batallions. Wet-rice and swidden farmers alike chafed at Federation enforcement of Indochina’s salt and opium monopolies.

<sup>93</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 2; Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 23.

and its political-economic value. The report states this observation clearly: in comparison with areas controlled by the “enemy,”

People in free zones are relatively happier and more comfortable: especially since [we] have been able to provide salt, the people already feel that their lives are guaranteed, that the government cares for them with all its heart.<sup>94</sup>

Of all the material goods DRV-allied agents and institutions brought into disputed territory, salt was the most important. With no local sources available, salt was desperately scarce. In addition to everyday nutritional requirements and condiment ingredient, peasants used salt to preserve meat and make medicine. For cadres and revolutionary agitators, among the range of goods they could pack upstream, salt’s high value to volume ratio made it the most easily transportable commodity.

The delivery of salt facilitated organizing predicated on a dialectical process of recognizing power’s (il)legitimacy. Note how “government” above is presented as though a singular paternal figure, one that “cares” for its people in a manner akin to a parent rearing his or her own children.<sup>95</sup> The report makes a claim to state legitimacy—one undoubtedly repeated in public meetings—based on its role as a caretaker affectively attached to a population and committed to caring for it materially. The population, in turn, rewards a parentalized state with something akin to filial attachment. In contrast, the “enemy” appears neglectful, either unable or unwilling to perform its normative duties: this logic delegitimized French colonialism as a form of “exploitation” (*bóc lột*).<sup>96</sup> As President Ho declared in 1945, a state’s intent and

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<sup>94</sup> Trần Quyết, “Báo cáo...” 20 July 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 4.

<sup>95</sup> Rather than reject such invocations of family regarding nation and/or state as somehow aberrant from “modern” norms of rationality, Tony Day argues for taking kinship seriously in relation to regionally specific forms and modes of power. *Fluid Iron* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002).

<sup>96</sup> Hannah Arendt writes dismissively of “exploitation,” and Marxist thought by extension, as a mode of revolutionary logic. She considers the “social question,” or mass poverty, to be a revolutionary dead-end, one that mistakenly substitutes economic “abundance” for political “freedom.” *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), 50-55. Her own logic, however, rests on a normative binary

organizational ability to “protect” (*bảo hộ*) its population indicated its legitimacy. By making salt differentially available to the Black River population, cadres provided concrete means and ends to differentiate one regime from another. In so doing, the DRV meant to demonstrate its own legitimacy as an ascendant state and, dialectically, to criticize the illegitimacy of its rival form.

Salt indicates how early revolutionary cadres working in contested territory observed popular discontent and devised a means to capitalize on it. Through close observation of local labor and trade relations, cadres identified what goods were in shortest supply and, in turn, what they could deliver to solicit and confirm popular support. Xa Văn Minh reported in autumn 1948 that, in terms of “our economic activities,” the revolutionary government was “unable to do anything else...aside from bringing salt, rice, and farmtools up to the people.” The word “up” indicates the exchange’s explicit directionality, i.e. from delta sites of production to mountain sites of consumption, and the implicit political forces driving it. In January 1949, a discussion of salt features in two sections under headings of “Politics” (*Chính trị*): Xa Văn Minh observed, first, that the “masses” were in short supply of salt, knives, and tobacco; and reported, second, that the Committee had delegated the Economic Service (*Ty kinh tế*) to distribute these same goods. By “helping” the people obtain “things they need most,” the chairman observed an intended effect: “the people feel the care and encouragement of the Government truly and clearly.”<sup>97</sup>

Just as cadres constructed an alternative system of exchange, they built also the institutions of an alternative local government. Beginning in late 1948, the movement of goods coincided with the building of mass organizations, such as women’s and youth unions, and the construction of a local “resistance and administrative

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between “private” and “public” spheres (the Greek *oikos* and *polis*) as realms for economic and political action, respectively. Cf., *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

<sup>97</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 19, 22.

apparatus,” i.e. local government.<sup>98</sup> The Economic Service figured in this institutional medley not only by distributing salt: it also provided markets for buying local produce such as ramie (*gai* or *Boehmeria nivea*) and cotton; selling foodstuffs and tools at subsidized prices; and, all the while, using a DRV currency (*đồng*) intended to replace the Indochinese piaster.<sup>99</sup> Although opium figures in archived Son-Lai Committee reports only insofar as French and Federation forces confiscated production in “occupied” territory or purchased it clandestinely through intermediaries in “free zones,” it would be surprising if the region’s most valuable cash crop did not figure in the DRV’s emerging exchange.<sup>100</sup> At the very least, opium registered as a commodity subject to contest.

Relations of exchange emerged in the spatial and temporal contexts of state-making. The symbols and materials associated with just rule were closely intertwined. For peasants, to accept the symbols of DRV power portended material benefits. For cadres, distributing material goods legitimized the making of state institutions. It was a two-way exchange that rested on commitments from both parties. Furthermore, reciprocal relations generated bonds of debt and obligation, cycles of payment and repayment. At what point in time the DRV chose to exercise its reciprocal claim became, in and of itself, a form of power.

What, at first, may have been an implicit exchange became, over time, more explicit and demanding: cadres initially expected loyalty from the local population and, later, demanded increasing shares of their labor and food. Initially, the local population’s outpouring of material and labor support appeared spontaneous. Following guerilla attacks and the configuration of state structures in late 1948 and

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<sup>98</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 5, 8.

<sup>99</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 14-15.

<sup>100</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 2; Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 27.

early 1949, local people endowed institutions with more than just abstract legitimacy.

In April 1949, the Committee reported:

Because of their enthusiasm, the masses have sacrificed all their rice, corn, [and] cassava in order to supply the military and each office in such large quantities that, in many places, the masses must eat forest tubers; and, on days they cannot find [tubers], they must beg.<sup>101</sup>

Just as they drew from their own food stores to feed soldiers and cadres, presented here as “military” and “office,” the “masses” also departed from household and farm to participate directly in the labors of revolution. In spite of their “desperate straits,” they remained “enthusiastically willing to participate in resistance activities,” such as joining guerilla raids and working as porters to transport supplies and wounded combatants. They demonstrated solidarity with the anti-colonial, revolutionary project, recognized above in approving terms of “sacrifice” (*hy sinh*). Soldiers and cadres shared in the conditions of shortage and, like their local supporters, went begging.<sup>102</sup>

That these exchanges unfolded in a context of warfare is significant: giving up one’s own food and labor for a broader cause brought danger, and potential death, to all these participants. Exchanging socially necessary goods and labor both signified and contributed to forming a relationship between cadre and peasant as partisans bound to one another through common danger: the very act of sharing began to constitute a community. Notwithstanding statist attempts to cultivate and direct such popular support, I argue that these spontaneous demonstrations of solidarity—and willingness to die—point at once to an emerging and anticipated sense of belonging to a larger community.<sup>103</sup> Of course, this emergent communal form was also subject to,

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<sup>101</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 13.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13-14.

<sup>103</sup> The experience and immanent prospect of shared death contributed to unifying a community, one whose bounded-ness as nation the state constructed yet whose unity was never guaranteed. Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” *Review* vol. 13 no. 3 (1990), 347; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 15.



and of, a state-making project. What may have been a euphoric moment of recognition became, in short order, a relationship predicated on different terms, i.e. between “state” and “society,” or “government” and “masses.”

Officials and soldiers could not—and did not—live on legitimacy alone. Statemaking placed increasing demands on local resources: cadres and soldiers needed food to subsist and labor to resist. Although sharing scarce resources and enduring difficulty together indicated emergent forms of solidarity and community, these gestures were not enough to meet rising state consumption. After a (recorded) year of providing the local population with “things they need most,” cadres and soldiers not only received, but also expected other things in return. What may have started as spontaneous sharing became increasingly the product of claim-making.

In mid-1949, early reports of local labor usage sometimes blur descriptive supply and prescriptive demand. For example, notwithstanding their purported “enthusiasm,” the Committee stated that, “the masses *must* go laboring...”<sup>104</sup> Did they volunteer? Or were they forced to work? The distinction was crucial because, as described above, the legitimacy of DRV claims on labor hinged on the explicit comparison with the supposedly “exploitative” or illegitimate colonial variant. In practice, the two labor regimes were similar, drawing on (male) labor to support military activities. How did the rising state normalize claims on the rural population?

Routinizing state claims on local food and labor meant addressing the unintended consequences these claims had already begun to manifest. First, local food supplies plummeted. With no hint of irony, a report chided peasants for “too zealously” (*sốt sắng quá*) supplying officials and soldiers with food, depleting their already limited household stores. Evidently, many supporters had been operating on

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<sup>104</sup> Italics added. The text reads, in two instances, “Dân chúng phải đi lao công...” Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 13, 15.

the assumption that such outlays would end quickly. But ongoing conflict and the continuing demands of soldiers and cadres meant that, over months, the additional consumption stretched everyone thin. Second, agricultural production also fell. The use of mature male labor off-farm left only the elderly, women, and children on-farm, depressing overall agricultural production. State demands on local food and labor supplies meant that the local peasantry, once again, had to resort to increasingly scarce forest foods to survive.<sup>105</sup> Claim-making worsened the very conditions the DRV purported to improve.

The report from April 1949 indicates that the Son Lai Committee attempted a number of different strategies simultaneously to solve labor and food supply problems, not all of which worked as intended. These various state strategies—market mechanisms, coerced labor participation, increased rewards, limited local labor recruitment—unfolded in the same spatial and temporal context. These strategies worked not only to meet short-term demands for labor and food; they also assumed longer-term significance as a means of institutionalizing and legitimizing a rising state’s claims on agrarian resources.

To support the military’s advances in 1948-49, revolutionary officials initially tried to hire “laborers” (*lao công*) for transport and to purchase grains, meat, and vegetables for provisions. The Economic Service tried to entice “manpower” (*nhân công*) by offering lucrative lump sums of 100 piasters, at wages of 5 piasters a day. Even this daily wage, however, at inflated rates of exchange, was insufficient to purchase daily subsistence rations of corn and rice. Moreover, farmers expressed concern about opportunity cost, that working off-farm was not worth foregoing “care for home and hearth” (*nuôi cơm hộ*). Officials complained they “could not hire people at all.” Similarly, the Economic Service also experimented with procuring food for

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<sup>105</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 14-15.

cadres by creating markets. They sold salt, tobacco, and rice at a subsidized “special price” and used proceeds to purchase what perishable produce the out-of-towners needed. But their revenue stream amounted only to a trickle because farmers remained reluctant to part with the same food they and their families needed to subsist.<sup>106</sup>

The failure of market-based approaches to generate sufficient labor and food resources led the Committee to draw on and exercise coercively their growing institutional power. Just as cadres could not live on legitimacy alone, they did not make institutions for their own sake. Recall that commune representatives were required to “help the military and offices, hands together with locality, to mobilize and collect labor, to collect provisions.”<sup>107</sup> In these reports, the use of force appears ambiguous, couched in euphemism. Faced with peasants unwilling to sell their produce, the Economic Service endeavored to “take” or “collect” (*lấy*) provisions: they invoked “the name of local government” (*danh nghĩa chính quyền*) to “request” (*nhờ*)—or compel?—farmers to sell produce at prices set by the service. Yet, by mid-1949, during the annual hunger season, rice, corn, and forest tubers became so scarce that market-based coercion resulted in perverse consequences: in order to meet their required grain “contribution,” some peasants sold their water buffalo—parting with their productive capital—in order to purchase rice and corn from the Economic Service and, then, turned these grains over to military units and civil offices.<sup>108</sup> Likewise, the Committee used the “power of paper” (*sức giấy*), or issued written orders, to “request” commune officials to “mobilize” (*huy động*) the “masses” to work as laborers.<sup>109</sup> Still faced with a short supply of labor in mid-1949, officials began to expand the pool of eligible laborers by “mobilizing” women living along roadways to

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*; Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 20.

<sup>107</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 29.

<sup>108</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19.

<sup>109</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 14.

work as porters.<sup>110</sup> Indeed, all the worry that the regional committee expressed about the efficacy of commune committees was, in large part, due to the latter's responsibility for extracting labor and supplies from constituent populations. Officials could call on the power of "state" to stake a claim on agrarian resources only if their subordinates were willing, or able, to heed the call.

Even these exercises in proclaiming authority, and enacting it coercively, could not overcome the early DRV state's locally-conditioned institutional limits. For commune representatives to gather provisions and labor was difficult work, noted Lò Văn Mười, both because of widespread hunger and because of the region's "vast area [and] sparse population." To "collect" labor, a given commune representative had to trudge from village to village, "as though each step was climbing a mountain."<sup>111</sup> Yet, by vacating his office, he was not available for everyday bureaucratic work. As such, the early DRV state lacked sufficient bureaucrats (empowered to represent themselves as state to society) to match either its own territorial ambitions or the population's spatial distribution. Institutional coercion could not squeeze sufficient labor and food from a population beset with conditions of scarcity—conditions the practice of claim-making worsened. Perhaps in recognition of its own limits, the Sơn Lai Committee opted to increase the volume of exchange and to change its course of policy.

The provision of locally scarce goods figured increasingly as compensation for people who participated in the military struggle. In late 1948, the Committee began using salt and tobacco as payment for farmers who built "secret" granaries to store corn and cassava and planted improved varieties of cotton.<sup>112</sup> Hiding grains from marauding opponents and increasing the yield of cash crops fed back into resource availability; salt completed the loop. Moreover, salt increasingly became a reward for

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<sup>110</sup> Lò Văn Mười, "Báo cáo..." 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 29.

<sup>112</sup> Sa Văn Minh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 28.

popular support of armed struggle. In mid-1949, on behalf of the Sơn Lai Committee, Lò Văn Mười requested that “upper levels” of government provide 2 metric tons of salt *every month* “in order to do political work.” In areas where “struggle” emerges, he explained, the people “give all their energy to follow us but are short of salt and have no money to buy it.” In other words, he wished to compensate peasants who supported allied combatants.

“If Sơn La has any land and any people now,” declared the Committee representative in his report’s closing line, “one reason is because there is salt to conduct political work.”<sup>113</sup> In this contested region, the distribution of salt enabled the DRV state to configure itself territorially and to appeal popularly. Political work (*công tác chính trị*) meant the activity of legitimation. Salt stood for a larger pattern of exchange in which the rising DRV state appealed to popular legitimacy by remediating everyday shortages and rewarding popular support. Along the way, the DRV expanded its territorial claim, yet one contingent on its military’s ability—and the Party’s willingness—to secure it.

Finally, the Sơn Lai Committee responded to ongoing labor shortages by changing policy to reduce local recruitment and import substitutes from neighboring regions. In early 1949, the Sơn Lai Committee first reported limiting the recruitment of local labor, “in order to give the people time to increase [agricultural] production.”<sup>114</sup> A few months later, the Committee issued an order “to limit the work of collecting local labor” but reported that the “masses” remained over-worked and underfed.<sup>115</sup> Although the order stopped short of ending local labor recruitment, it seemed a logical response to regional hunger and on-farm labor shortages. Increasing agricultural production, however, was not just a means of feeding the local population.

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<sup>113</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 42.

<sup>114</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 25.

<sup>115</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19.

Just as salt rewarded peasants who secreted away grains and informed cadres of their whereabouts, the policy can also be read as a strategy to increase future resource availability for state consumption.

Reducing demands on local labor raised other questions. Who, then, served as porters to the military? Who transported the massive amounts of salt from downstream into these mountain hinterlands? The Committee exercised an option of last resort: to rely on manpower from outside their bailiwick. “Only by requiring [Son La’s people] to work in the domain of Son La,” wrote Lò Văn Mười, “do they obtain enough time to raise [agricultural] production.” Beginning on the Red River’s shores, pedestrian porters “mobilized” in Phú Thọ Province crossed the western Red River Delta bearing arms for the military and bringing “downstream” salt and rice to “help” Son La’s residents. On the shores of the Black River, near its confluence with the Red, local residents picked up the “heavy burden” and headed uphill to complete the transit.<sup>116</sup>

### ***The early revolutionary program and its limits***

The legacy and ongoing practice of colonial rule hindered and favored oppositional organizing. On the one hand, persistent problems associated with recruiting leaders points to the social conditions growing out of Đèo clan rule. Neither the colonial French nor the Đèo clan and its deputies had done much to provide popular access to basic social services such as health care or education. Malaria and water borne diseases were endemic and frequently went untreated.<sup>117</sup> Wide-spread

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<sup>116</sup> Phú Thọ porters came from districts of Thanh Sơn, Yên Lập, and Cẩm Khê. The newly opened route—likely cleared by Son La and Phú Thọ laborers themselves—led through Đà Bắc above Hoà Bình because, as of early 1949, “uninterrupted warfare” meant that road and river travel were too dangerous. Cf., Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 19; Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 20.

<sup>117</sup> The Son Lai Committee estimated serious illness among 10% of the population, especially during the rainy season; medicine was unavailable and the Committee had yet to establish clinics. Trần Quyết, “Báo cáo...” 20 July 1948, NAVC 3, PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 4. In 1948, an (un-named) deadly epidemic spread in “French areas,” or Federation territory, affecting Yên Châu, Phù Yên, Mường Bù, and Mường La; ominously, the report notes that, “the deaths were less urgent than in 1947.” Sa Văn

hunger, displacement, and forced resettlement all increased vulnerability to disease. Illiteracy was very high among the population and only a small fraction could read and write in any language.<sup>118</sup> In short, many local leaders could not read, and Kinh cadres unused to these conditions often fell ill.

On the other hand, cadres capitalized on these wide-spread social problems by casting blame squarely on the colonial regime. Summarizing conditions in 1948, Xa Văn Minh's report provides textual clues as to what many Việt Minh organizers must have been speaking orally. In terms of education, he accused the French and the Federation of following a policy of "dumbing down the people" (*chính sách ngu dân*) by neglecting education and opening "only a few" schools. In terms of public health, he accused them of "withholding medicine from the masses" and running so few hospitals that they "only plucked from the people at large." He accused them of deliberately creating conditions of debauchery: "The enemy creates degenerate (*hủ hại*) customs such as: gambling, extra-marital affairs, drunken youth, opium." He summarized a policy of deliberate neglect: the "enemy does not pay attention to improving rural society" (*cải cách nông thôn*).<sup>119</sup>

In a dialectical twist of such ostensible neglect, social improvement emerged as a means to legitimize institutions alternative, and militarily opposed, to colonial rule and the Thái Federation. Xa Văn Minh captured the revolutionary mood and assumed a programmatic posture: "we attend exhaustively and particularly to the problems of culture and society," and claimed that, "the work of improving rural

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Minh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 16.

<sup>118</sup> The Sơn Lai Committee reported a 99% illiteracy rate in mid-1949. But this estimate follows a discussion critiquing the "low cultural level" of local cadres and may be less an accurate statistic than an expression of official frustration. Lò Văn Mười, "Báo cáo..." 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 29. A mid-1948 report presented a more modest, but still appalling, 80% illiteracy rate. Trần Quyết, "Báo cáo..." 20 July 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 4.

<sup>119</sup> Sa Văn Minh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 28.

society has been thoroughly implemented.”<sup>120</sup> He echoed a broader theme: to march towards progress along a path cleared by emerging state institutions and Việt Minh-led mass organizations. In this endeavor, these overlapping institutions and organizations invoked a power of representation, to re-present social conditions in ideologically-loaded terms of comparison.

As with material exchange, progress and legitimacy were closely intertwined. Wherever conditions permitted, and particularly in “liberated” zones, cadres established social service programs and mass organizations coordinated by the Sơn Lai Committee. In contrast with “enemy areas,” self-proclaimed “free zones” became sites where the same “degenerate” conditions listed above were (supposedly) absent and mass organizations distributed modern medicine and encouraged learning through wide-spread popular education.<sup>121</sup> Education (*giáo dục*) and propaganda (*tuyên truyền*) went hand in hand as cadres taught locals to differentiate between a just “democratic” government and unjust French “exploitation.” Revolutionary outreach preached a curriculum with pointed lessons about legitimate and illegitimate rule.

As with much of “Vietnam” during and after the anti-colonial war, a literacy campaign educated people in the Romanized Kinh/Viet language script known as *quốc ngữ*.<sup>122</sup> In 1948, a delegation of 13 cadres staffed a Popular Education Service (*Ty bình dân học vụ*) to work with village heads in districts of Mộc Châu and Phù Yên.<sup>123</sup> By April 1949 they reported the following results: out of a population of 11,637 in Mộc Châu aged 8 and up, 1512 could read and write *quốc ngữ*; out of 467 people in

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<sup>120</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 28.

<sup>121</sup> Whether disease incidence changed or not is unclear: two nurses arrived in Sơn Lai in late 1948 to distribute medicine; by April 1949 they formed two mobile teams but were “very short of manpower.” Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 21, 28; Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, 19.

<sup>122</sup> Cf., Alexander Woodside, “The Triumphs and Failures of Mass Education in Vietnam,” *Pacific Affairs* 56 (Autumn, 1983): 401-427.

<sup>123</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 20-21.



Phù Yên, 57 became literate.<sup>124</sup> Yet even these modest results were recorded in areas where “the movement” reached its highest popular appeal: much of Son La’s population and all of Lai Châu’s did *not* have access to literacy training. Indeed, by mid-1949, regional promoters of literacy campaigns acknowledged broader limits. Adult learners had difficulty learning how to “pronounce” Vietnamese sounds and tones; and written materials did not feature local scripts. The proposed solution, to provide more written materials translated into local languages, seems to beg the problem of literacy in *any* language.<sup>125</sup> For early learners, the construction of schools “had no results” because “people don’t want to go far from their home to study” and, for those living proximate to schools, “the numbers are very small.”<sup>126</sup> One can imagine that educating children may have posed vague benefits while costs were clear: many parents had neither the means (to board students close to school) nor the interest (to lose a source of labor) to send children off-farm for extended periods.

Notwithstanding these efforts to institutionalize formal education, the ongoing problem of local (il)literacy has three inter-related theoretical, historiographic, and methodological effects. Theoretically, if Vietnamese had already assumed what Benedict Anderson calls “politico-cultural eminence” among urban and downstream residents, then it took hard work to spread Vietnamese in the Black River as both a bureaucratic language and a language in “common” (*phổ thông*). Cadres worked self-consciously to propagate Vietnamese and endow it with a dominant status in relation to other spoken and written languages.<sup>127</sup> Over time, Vietnamese achieved normative status equated with national communicability and state correspondence, adding a

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<sup>124</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 15.

<sup>125</sup> Reports provide no data on specific ethno-linguistic groups whose languages were mutually unintelligible and multilingualism was the norm for cross-group communication. Although some languages had written traditions (for ex., White & Black Thái, Dao), the number of speakers able to read and write them was limited.

<sup>126</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 23.

<sup>127</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), 42-46.

socio-linguistic dimension to emerging relations of political and cultural domination.

Historiographically, lack of local proficiency in *quốc ngữ* means that much of this region's historical record—i.e., archived Vietnamese-language reports—must have been written by “downstream cadres” for whom it was their first language.<sup>128</sup> Because they spoke, read, and wrote in Vietnamese, Kinh cadres were uniquely able and empowered to record affairs of state.<sup>129</sup> In contrast, that so many people did *not* learn Vietnamese indicates the vibrancy of the region's many diverse spoken languages. Methodologically, as Shail Mayaram argues, oral traditions remain an under-utilized source for a critical study of state formation.<sup>130</sup> Although studying this topic orally was and is beyond this project's scope, historical actors certainly did grasp the potential of non-written communication. Indeed, agents of the DRV state and Việt Minh educators engaged their audiences orally and publicly, either through local interpreters or by learning local languages. However limited their content may be, archived reports serve as textual traces of oral discussions.

How did cadres establish relations with everyday people? How did the former educate in the latter a desire for education? In official parlance, how did cadres working either in “free zones” or behind enemy lines “generate a political influence among the masses”? Early reports indicate that Việt Minh organizing efforts had to overcome two difficulties: a peasantry pre-occupied with their own subsistence and a rival political program. Local peasant residents initially expressed a “desire” only to “make a living in peace.”<sup>131</sup> For them, evidently, “liberation” (*giải phóng*) meant

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<sup>128</sup> That Vietnamese was the language of record, not French, presents a slightly different problem than what Trouillot finds in “Haitian historiography, as in the case of most third world countries” (1995), 55. Although Vietnam's historical narratives are similarly predicated on unequal “archival power,” fluency in a national, not colonial, language was associated with officialdom in the early DRV.

<sup>129</sup> Relatedly, many local officials did not write their own reports. As such, even though Thái-speaking signatories on Sơn-Lai reports, such as Xa Văn Minh and Lò Văn Mươi, were probably literate and fluent in Vietnamese, they were most likely just that—signatories. I highlight them as authors because Kinh/Viet signatories replace them in 1952-54, indicating evolving relations of language and power.

<sup>130</sup> Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

<sup>131</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 1948, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 4.

pursuing a livelihood untroubled by warfare—an aspiration diverging from the cadres’ expressed interest in armed struggle against colonialism and for social revolution. To further complicate matters, the “enemy” Thái Federation was pursuing its own political agenda, one not altogether different: employing nationalist rhetoric, using “propaganda,” and, simultaneously, organizing “puppet” militaries and officials.<sup>132</sup> Notwithstanding the condemnatory language, the Federation approach seems very similar to its rival: seek legitimacy while constructing institutions and developing capacity for force. So what did the Việt Minh do that the Federation did not?

In contrast to the Federation, the Việt Minh Front developed a sophisticated program that, by incorporating everyday local conditions into education and propaganda, did more explanatory work. Hunger and food shortages among peasants and cadres alike provided an immediate point of entry for agitation. An excerpt on “politics” from January 1949 suggests how cadres appealed to hungry people by linking the (bad) economy with (unjust) politics *and* provided them with a revolutionary solution.<sup>133</sup>

We cope [with the Federation] through opening eyes to the wallet of Đèo Văn Long and Bạc Cầm Quý, peeling away the skin so the people know that when the Thái Federation comes, all their draft animals are lost; all rice, chickens, ducks are lost; they die of starvation, die on corvée, die in military service;

For cadres and allied educators alike, observing and reporting was part and parcel of using these conditions to recruit popular support for the revolutionary cause. Peasants were taught to associate their suffering with the Federation

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<sup>132</sup> The Thái Federation, presumably with French backing, employed people from Việt Tri (Phú Thọ province) who supported the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD) and persuaded Thái leaders to join a rival nationalist cause. Although one can interpret this policy as encouraging links between Thái and Kinh peoples, the report condemned in broad strokes any and all propaganda of “splitting Thái from Kinh.” Lò Văn Mươi, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 39.

<sup>133</sup> The passage cited below comes from Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, 26-27.

and, therefore, to find its form of rule unjust. Note the simple language accessible to an audience lacking formal education: wallet stands for wealth; “peeling the skin,” as one might do to a piece of fruit, means exposing a purported truth lying just underneath lived experience. Again, this is logic intended to reveal exploitation.

Next, cadres attempted to cast pupil peasants within a broader community, one defined by militant opposition to alleged exploitation. The lesson continued:

[the people’s] death can be replaced with the death of the enemy; to explain the story with pamphlets and National Salvation newspapers (*Cứu Quốc*) in all areas of enemy control; to announce the news from our front; to praise the masses who support the struggles rising to the surface in Mùng Mãn, Hát Lót, Mùng Sai, Mai Sơn; to teach the people to plant a [communal] garden, not one planted by or for each house;

Should they heed the call, the peasants in the Black River region were not alone: they were cast as part of a broader community, one constituted through struggle and shared danger. Mass organizations coordinated by the Việt Minh Front gave organizational form, and provided politically loyal leadership, to this emergent community. To plant a garden for public use, rather than household subsistence, worked in a double register: metaphorically, to think communally and cultivate shared benefits; literally, to provide sustenance for visiting cadres and soldiers.

Next, the lesson provided concrete steps to support the revolutionary cause:

Assist cadres to go deep, to get to their target in all rear areas in order to organize and create secret base areas. Persuade puppet authorities and mobilize puppet soldiers. Organize the provision of salt, tobacco, knives, etc. in order to create a political influence among the masses.

That cadres required assistance indicates how they needed local knowledge to navigate

unfamiliar terrain among people they did not know. “Creating a political influence” was the result of a number of lessons, one capped by the distribution of scarce goods and the onset of exchange.

As this extended excerpt demonstrates, the revolutionary message involved making several cognitive leaps. Cadres instructed local people to imagine beyond the confines of regionally specific rule and to associate themselves with a broader movement, i.e. “*our* front” or “National Salvation.” In short, cadres invited peasants to join a revolutionary community supposedly united in opposition to colonial rule. Membership in this community portended benefits, such as salt, as well as responsibilities, such as feeding cadres and guiding them. Who, or what, decided these terms of membership and exchange? Significantly, the above passage continues and ends on this message:

Create immediately a local people’s government in the areas where struggles explode in order to call upon the masses to unify in killing the French pirates.<sup>134</sup>

In sum, convincing peasants to support the revolution required providing them, first, an explanation for their suffering and, second, an alternative to improve their lot. Once guerilla actions destabilized the Federation’s local government and secured local support, cadres endeavored to build rival local institutions featuring themselves as key players. As such, the extended lesson in legitimation worked teleologically—and self-consciously so—by containing in its beginning a desired end: a statist agenda ended with the creation of the idea and institutions of state itself.<sup>135</sup> In addition to joining the work of legitimating and institutionalizing emerging state power, cadres also aimed to create a “masses” on whose resources this power enabled them to use and direct. If

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<sup>134</sup> Sa Văn Minh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 27.

<sup>135</sup> Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1(1988): 58-89.

state formation is a form of analysis, then for DRV-affiliated political cadres in the Black River region it was also a self-conscious program.

A self-assessment follows this explicitly political program and rates its efficacy. Among others, the program's "strengths" (*ưu điểm*) included increasing popular support, distrust and hatred for the "French pirates" and Federation leaders, luring Federation officials and soldiers to the revolutionary cause, and the creation of secret base areas. Meanwhile, the program's "weaknesses" (*khuyết điểm*) included a mismatch between commune-based "local government" and village-based settlement; insufficient funds for "political work," i.e. the purchase of salt; the overuse of local labor; and the heavy demands "offices" placed on local rice supplies.<sup>136</sup> Although referenced to work conducted in 1948, I have discussed how each of these so-called "pluses" and "minuses" carried forward for the next year or so. What bears repeating is the reciprocity embedded in an evolving relationship conceived and enacted as political. How this relationship changed over time, and how the claims organized by and for "state" grew with respect to an emerging "society," is the subject of subsequent chapters.

If the revolutionary program was eliciting popular support during this time, it was through a mixture of coercion and consent. In early 1949, Lò Văn Mười observed that, "the army has arrived up here in large numbers" and, through their armed challenge, had made people "gain confidence." In apparent fulfillment of the program above, he described how committees and line agencies, cadres and mass organizations had quickly "grasped the opportunity" by "seizing" popular "optimism" and harnessing it to the long-term resistance struggle. Along the way, these state agencies constituted themselves organizationally and oriented their activities both towards

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<sup>136</sup> Sa Văn Minh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Jan 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 78, p. 27.

supporting the military effort and attempting to remediate local shortages and boost agricultural production.<sup>137</sup>

Whatever happened later, he seems to say, the armed challenge came first. Whether this sequence was always so is not clear. What is clear is that nascent state institutions relied fundamentally on the military's coercive power. Indeed, militarized coercion destabilized the Federation, demonstrated its vulnerability, and secured territory to establish DRV institutions. Although both local peasants and Thái elites featured as the intended audience, each played different roles in the coercive performance: the former served as porters and larders; the latter either as targets or potential DRV officials.

Loyalties of the Thái elite, in particular, became the focus of sustained—and often violent—struggle. Thái hereditary nobility (*phìa tạo*) serving the Federation found themselves, their families, and their staff targeted by armed propaganda teams for assassination. Selective murder served as a revolutionary tool to enforce allegiance among lords of hotly disputed *muang*. In between Federation compradors and revolutionary loyalists, many Thái lords remained equivocal. Even Bạc Cầm Quý, the Thái Federation's Son La Province Chief (*tỉnh trưởng*), reportedly expressed ambivalence about which side to choose: "I want to come out very badly, but am suspicious of the Việt Minh [who] have killed two of my younger siblings, suspicious of what might result." Caught between two powerful claimants to Son La's population and territory, many lords agreed amongst themselves that, "when the Việt-Minh come, just let them be, attend to them, and don't tell the Westerners anymore." Cầm Bình, chief lord (*châu muang*) of Yên Châu, announced to his subordinates: "Should you see the Việt Minh coming, don't say anything and give them food and drink secretly."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Lò Văn Mười, "Báo cáo..." 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 24-25.

<sup>138</sup> Lò Văn Mười, "Báo cáo..." 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 6, 23.

Some lords played both sides of a moving fence, apparently supporting French soldiers by day and Việt Minh affiliates by night.

Other officials changed sides more openly, yet for reasons perhaps departing from revolutionary fervor. Lù Văn Dương of Mường La wrote an order calling on “all his colleagues” still loyal to the French to “turn”; his title, Vice Chairman (*phó Chủ tịch*), indicates that, by “turning,” he retained his leadership position in the DRV’s local government.<sup>139</sup> Lò Văn Puôn, Lord of Mường Chanh, decided to change allegiance yet added a revealing request: in self-deprecating language, he called on Lò Văn Mười, “to protect me so the Việt Minh will not murder me.”<sup>140</sup> Indeed, some elites joined the movement not because they bought the program. Rather, as these examples indicate, some pledged allegiance to preserve their status and position or, simply, to save their own skin. Inquiring why these elites joined the revolutionary opposition exposes one limit to consent: coercion divided the loyalties of Thái officials, sometimes even within one person, and forced them to make a difficult choice. Furthermore, any coercively achieved allegiance counted on the lords’ traditional authority to command their *muang* domains and subject populations. Regardless of why they joined, the DRV welcomed elite Thái leaders because they often carried along Thái peasants loyal to their lord.

The revolutionary program’s stated emphasis on consent reached another limit among peoples who acted less according to its logic and more in line with their own form of reason. Seeking legitimacy based on a rejection of “exploitation” and an embrace of “freedom” rested on a foundation of rationality—convincing an audience to weigh the costs and benefits of unjust and just rule, respectively. Education and

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<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Lò Văn Puôn served in French administration under Japanese occupation and, following the latter’s coup-de-force of March 1945, fled with French officials. On their return, he served the post-war French administration in Mường Chanh, Mai Sơn district. Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 5 Apr 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 23.



propaganda used a logic of persuasion to “peel away the skin” of perceived reality, thereby exposing the underlying injustice of the French colonial project and its local instantiation, i.e. the Thái Federation. The program presented an alternative, one that could be achieved only through struggle (*đấu tranh*). It was a struggle for nation, a form of community imagined to transcend social differences. Once the locals identified with this struggle, accepted its burdens, and unified as a nation along the way, then a new state would appear to represent their interests justly. True progress could then begin—or so the program went. Black River peoples did not always act in concert with this underlying logic.

To take the idea of social difference seriously means accepting that the logic underlying this revolutionary program, i.e. its inherent rationality, was not the only reason motivating diverse groups of people—even if the outcome was the same. A story recorded in mid-1949 illustrates the depth of difference in a moment of encounter:

At a French post in Mộc Ly one day, a lightning bolt struck the French flagpole, smashing it to pieces and leaving the flag hanging in tatters; one time a forest rooster came to the post to flirt with a domestic chicken and it was captured and eaten; another time a deer came to the French post and was also captured and eaten; the masses in the occupied area who were reactionary or still of superstitious mind read [these events] as inauspicious omens meaning the French would lose to the Việt Minh; and they looked for a way to cross over to our free zone. Result: as many as 20 people close to our position in Mộc joined us.<sup>141</sup>

What are we to make of this story? Whether or not the story happened exactly as recorded is beside the point: the archived text presents these events alone as enough to convince a group of people to join the revolutionary cause. Some signifying events appear self-evident, such as the lightning bolt striking the French flag. Although other events, such as the appearance of a wild rooster and deer, remain incomprehensible to

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<sup>141</sup> Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 37.

the report's readers, their appearance was fully comprehensible—as “inauspicious omens” (*điềm gở*)—to the historical actors. The story is a conversion narrative, yet the reason underlying why this group converted was—and still is—unclear for everyone except them. Even though the report claimed achievement of its stated goal (support for “us”), the actors' collective decision appears unrelated to the program's professed rationality. Why exactly these twenty people took a profound, even deadly, risk remains unknown.

I argue that such inexplicability carries important historiographic implications for a study of state formation in an area of profound and multiple forms of social difference. The report's author, Lò Văn Muối, did not understand the motivations of these people; one can assume that the report's contemporaneous readers shared his lack of understanding. To call the historical actors “reactionary” (*phản động*) cannot begin to explain why these 20 people suddenly abandoned their homes and crossed military lines at great risk. To call them “of superstitious mind” (*có óc dị đoan*) was, most likely, a pejorative dismissal of uninformed thinking. Yet the dismissal itself betrays the limits of a self-revealing logic oriented always towards building some “Vietnamese” community with its own form of rule. It also points to unwillingness among collaborating Thái officials and Kinh cadres to think beyond a shared culture-bound logic, to grasp a series of events as the historical actors themselves did. Presumably, the actors were highland peoples, the same “Mountain people” the emerging political coalition treated as inextricably Other, yet whose participation they nonetheless sought.

Scholars reading this archived report would do well to differentiate their interpretation of these and other curious events from the ideological work the cadres and officials were doing. In a critical treatment of Prasenjit Duara's *Rescuing History from the Nation*, Keith Taylor offers some useful advice. He welcomes Duara's

invitation to disentangle history from History, to find an alternative to a teleological interpretation of events oriented always towards a national end. “If we can clear our minds of ‘Vietnameseness’ as the object of our knowledge,” Taylor writes, the scholar can better embrace the motivations of historical actors in their specific historical and spatial contexts. Indeed, it appears that the historical actors above had no shared sense of what “Vietnam” was or what the officials meant it to be. Yet Taylor differs with Duara over the very interpretability of textual “traces” from the past. He argues that the “historical specificities of the archive” may speak ambiguously, potentially disconnected and discontinuous with *any* linearized notion of “common history.”<sup>142</sup>

Like Taylor, I wish to preserve the ambiguity presented in archival traces. Yet even if the event remains ambiguous on its own terms, I would argue that its location in a Vietnamese state archive tells us something about a region in the making. This trace reveals the limits of a culture-bound logic informing officials and cadres operating in an unfamiliar context among diverse peoples. Within the lumpen and undifferentiated “masses,” in other words, were spatially and historically specific social cleavages that belied the ostensible unity of this category. The Black River region presented cadres with profound and multiple forms of social difference, historically produced and reproduced in terms of class, status, gender, and ethno-linguistic identities. The official report recorded this encounter in a Vietnamese language and idiom its official audience understood: calling on a discourse of self and Other, recognizing the former as reasonable and the latter as un-reasonable. Archived in state documents, traces of the region’s historically multiple and fluid social relations reappear in a transformed guise: reframed as culturally uninformed thinking on the

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<sup>142</sup> Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Keith Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond History and Region,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (Nov., 1998): 949-978. Their debate hinges on a critique of History and its guiding telos, as stated in Georg Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).

fringes of state power and national community; simplified as regional differences between frontier and center. Just as the state's national archives muffle or mute alternative understandings and trajectories, they amplify an ascribed interpretation, working to cast a frontier of "vast land sparse people."

Persuasion did not always win over the population on the merits of education, reason, and rationality. However the 20 people arrived at their decision, their sudden pledge of support was historically specific and potentially temporary. Like the Thái elites who changed allegiances to preserve their own positions, the many and diverse peoples populating the Black River region sometimes acted according to their own interests, for their own reasons. Even among ostensible revolutionary converts, social difference did not melt away: joining a movement might mean sublimating differences and not transcending them fully and forever. The story foreshadows a series of events that would trouble post-colonial state formation, belying the ascribed unity of a national frontier, revealing its own brand of "internal" disunity.<sup>143</sup> If the "Resistance War against the French" in northwest Tonkin did ultimately produce a local coalition to topple the colonial regime, then any unity achieved was, at best, temporary. In this region specifically and in Vietnam more generally, particularly during the 1950s, disunity and unity were always in dialectical tension.

If archival traces sometimes speak ambiguously, then archival gaps present another difficulty for historical analysis. The last archived report from the Son-Lai Committee is dated 20 November 1950. From that date, the National Archives of Vietnam contain no locally produced documentation until December 1952. As such, a two year-long gap in DRV-produced primary source documentation separates inquiry into what may be thought of as early and later efforts to form a state in a time of war.

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<sup>143</sup> I hint at the "calling for a king movement" which appeared among highland groups in 1956-58.

What happened during this period? How do Vietnamese-language secondary sources handle what appears to be a gap? How do the primary sources end?

The emergence of the People's Republic of China in October 1949 altered the calculus of political and strategic planning in Indochina generally and in Tonkin's northwest corner in particular. Leaders of Indochina's armed resistance against French colonialism gained a new source of material, ideological, and strategic support located north of the Sino-Indochinese border.<sup>144</sup> Emboldened by the advantageous conditions, the ICP convened its Third National Conference in January and February 1950 where Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp announced an escalation in military strategy from "equilibrium" (*cầm cự*) to "general counteroffensive" (*tổng phản công*) against the French.<sup>145</sup> These stages were modeled on Mao Tse-Tung's strategy for waging revolutionary war, prescribing movement from guerilla, to mobile, and, finally, fixed-position warfare.<sup>146</sup> As noted above, these ICP leaders also used the occasion to declare Indochina to be a single battlefield. If the borderlines between Indochina's "nations" (i.e., Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos) remained blurred, then the border between "Vietnam" and China took on new significance—not as a barrier but as a conduit for revolutionary support. That the People's Liberation Army of China had advanced to "the Sino-Việt border," declared Giáp, "means that our international isolation has come to an end."<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Cf., Brocheux and Hémery (2009), 365.

<sup>145</sup> Trường Chinh, "Hoàn thành nhiệm vụ chuẩn bị, chuyển mạnh sang tổng phản công" and Võ Nguyên Giáp, "Nhiệm vụ quân sự trước mắt chuyển sang tổng phản công," *Văn Kiện Đảng* vol 11, yr 1950 (2001), pp. 19-153. Cf., Furuta (1992), 149-151.

<sup>146</sup> Mao's ideas on warfare and military conduct were influential among DRV politico-military leaders. The three stages are (in Vietnamese): guerilla warfare in defense (*phòng ngự*), mobile warfare in equilibrium (*cầm cự*), and position warfare in general counteroffensive (*tổng phản công*). Cf., Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Military Writings* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), esp. "Problems of Strategy in China's Guerilla War" (Dec 1936), "Problems of Strategy in Guerilla War against Japan" (May 1938), "On Protracted War" (May 1938), "Problems of War and Strategy" (Nov 1938). For commentary, cf., William Duiker, "Ho Chi Minh and the Strategy of People's War" in Mark Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds. *The First Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>147</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp, "Nhiệm vụ..." *Văn Kiện Đảng* vol 11, yr 1950 (2001), 108.

The Sino-Viet border's potential for facilitating this broad strategic shift bore particular significance for the northern regions of Tonkin. On 6 January 1950, only two weeks before the Conference convened, Trường Chinh had issued an order to "open a Northwest Campaign and to prepare the battlefield in the Northeast."<sup>148</sup> He contrasted the "Northwest," as the "enemy's weakest area," with the "Northeast," i.e., the Việt Bắc, as "our important battlefield." Accordingly, his plan ordered the Northwest to prepare "quickly and just enough" while the Northeast was ordered to prepare for the "long term." For the Northwest—and not for the Northeast—the Party Secretary specified that "after each victory, our army will withdraw." These distinctions point to a significant element of Maoist military doctrine. As John T. McAlister writes, the general counteroffensive adhered to the principle of mobile warfare, "a war without fronts" or a "war without territorial objectives."<sup>149</sup> Yet, as the next two years made clear, the principle did not apply equally to DRV objectives in north Tonkin's western and eastern marches.

The Party's de-emphasis on territorial control in northwest Tonkin was accompanied by an emphasis on expanding control of territory in its northeast, or Việt Bắc. Recall that the latter had been site of a revolutionary base area since World War II. In September-October 1950, the People's Army launched a series of attacks in Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn: not only did the offensive expand the Việt Bắc base area, it also opened a secure overland route to facilitate exchange with the People's Republic of China. Meanwhile, whether in response to the early "Northwest Campaign" or on their own initiative, French-allied forces counterattacked in the Black River region to great effect, recovering contested territory and allocating it to the Thái Federation. The formation in 1949 of a 3<sup>rd</sup> Thái Battalion under Thái Federation command, writes Jean

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<sup>148</sup> Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về mở chiến dịch Tây Bắc và chuẩn bị chiến trường Đông Bắc," 6 January 1950, *Văn Kiện Đảng* vol 11, yr 1950 (2001), 7-9.

<sup>149</sup> McAlister (1967), 772-773.

Jerusalemy, “permitted the recovery and pacification of all Black Thái country in Son La” such that, in 1950, he observed, “the entire country between the Red and Mã Rivers, between the Chinese and Lao frontiers was calm and pacified.” Beginning in June 1951, in a new strategy tested during the battle of Hoà Bình in winter 1951-52, continues the colonial official, French forces built a series of blockhouses “to reinforce all the Thái country’s front, facing East.”<sup>150</sup> With additional French troops and a fortified barrier to protect approaches from overland routes to and from the Việt Bắc, the Thái Federation emerged militarily stronger and in control of a broader territory.

Was the early Northwest Campaign a decoy, a feint to lure French-allied forces away from their “important battlefield”? A document from 1951 chastises cadres still active in northwest Tonkin for “bragging irresponsibly” about “bridging over” (*bắc cầu*) the Black River during the general counteroffensive which, not surprisingly, made the people “suspicious” towards cadres and the government they represented.<sup>151</sup> Notably, the criticism is oriented towards tone and does not deny content. To what degree Trường Chinh and other Party leaders intended the loss of one territory in order to gain another, thereby *allowing* for reprisals against local supporters in the former, is unclear. If so, then they revealed a marginal preference: in spite of Hồ Chí Minh’s 1945 Declaration, military objectives trumped the population’s wellbeing; perhaps the alterity of the frontier population made them expendable. What is clear is that the Party’s choice to de-emphasize territorial control in the Black River region bore grave consequences for both emerging institutions and their early supporters. If Mao himself warned that, “the fighting in this stage will be ruthless and the country will face

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<sup>150</sup> A month after the October 1950 French defeat in the Việt Bắc, General Allessandri withdrew from Lào Cai and regrouped in the Black River region. According to Jerusalemy, concentrating Federation and Expeditionary forces enabled them to “liquidate the last islets of Viet resistance in Long He, to the west of Tuần Giáo-Thuận Châu, and to suppress all guerillas on the Lao frontier of Điện Biên Phủ (Nam Hou)” (1953), 55-58.

<sup>151</sup> “Dự thảo đề án phát triển chiến tranh du kích và củng cố cơ sở chính trị năm 1952,” year 1951, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1125.

devastation,” then the fighting’s resulting devastation was spatially specific.<sup>152</sup>

Party documents and official histories portray northwest Tonkin and its people during the period from late 1950 to 1952 in a particular light. Military and Party histories recount how French-led “raids” or “military sweeps” (*càn quét*) destroyed “revolutionary infrastructure” around Điện Biên Phủ, all along Route 41 throughout Sơn La’s southern tier, and north into Yên Bái; cadres either went into hiding or took flight.<sup>153</sup> The counterattack crushed nascent forms of DRV administration in all the same places where they had only recently appeared. A republished Party document from 1952 announcing the re-opening of guerilla bases states that, particularly in 1951, “cruel repression” led to the “destruction of our guerilla bases, the dispersion of our armed forces.”<sup>154</sup> “All armed forces,” explains one Party history, “were not yet strong enough to support the masses’ political resistance.”<sup>155</sup> Although the military neither secured territory for state or Party control nor did they protect the “masses,” this outcome was partly a matter of choice, of allocating limited force capability eastward to the Việt Bắc. Together, these official accounts focus disproportionately, if not tellingly, on political-military institutions to the exclusion of those local people who supported them. Moreover, told as background and prelude to the Party’s project to re-open guerilla bases in June 1952 and the People’s Army’s commencement of a (second) Northwest Campaign later in October, these official narratives claim a questionable retroactive continuity with earlier efforts.

What happened to the people these soldiers and cadres left behind? Rather than

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<sup>152</sup> Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, Ltd, 1954), 186.

<sup>153</sup> Although available sources do not specify their destination, I would guess base areas in Laos and/or the Việt Bắc. Cf., Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La (1995), 124-133; Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên (2005), 75-94; Ban Nghiên cứu Lịch sử Đảng Lai Châu (1980), 30-42.

<sup>154</sup> The document lists the following places (provinces): Mai Thuận, Mường La (Sơn La), Tuần Giáo, Điện Biên (Lai Châu), Than Uyên (Yên Bái). Khu Ủy Tây Bắc, “Nghị Quyết Án về việc phát triển du kích chiến tranh tại Tây Bắc,” June 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol. 13 year 1952 (2001), 502-504.

<sup>155</sup> Ban Nghiên cứu Lịch sử Đảng Lai Châu (1980), 31.



try and fill in this silence, let us instead end with the two archival documents from 1950 which, admittedly, only hint at what was to come. In mid-1950, the Son Lai Committee reported on “military conditions” in familiar and unfamiliar language:

Land is spacious, people few, forest and mountains many: the few plains areas have many bandits and are in enemy hands; nonetheless, over the past few years, laborers have continually devoted transportation and provisions to the military, guerillas, and offices; [we] *don't know why they can love [us] any longer.*<sup>156</sup>

Here, the discourse of “vast land, sparse people” appears to excuse the military’s territorial losses and to mitigate its effects by minimizing the population affected. That “plains areas” were in “enemy hands” highlights the obverse of what Jerusalem observed with regards to the Thái Federation: the DRV and its military lost control of the few *muang* areas in which they had established institutions in 1948-49. The report continues: “throughout” one such *muang*, in Yên Châu, the people “struggled” to evade French “capture” and relocation in “concentrated settlements,” or the *gros villages*, wanting only to “return to their villages and make a living.”<sup>157</sup> Local people who had earlier pledged support now suffered terribly from hunger, displacement, and collective punishment. Nonetheless, local peasants *still* worked to transport military supplies, join guerilla teams, and provide soldiers and officials with food.

The above passage is curious for its expression of affect by local people for military and state agents. That peasants continued to perform brute labor and share in their food evidently surprised the Committee, leading the report’s author to wonder why they continued to “love us.” The expression demonstrates, perhaps, an affective

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<sup>156</sup> Italics added to the phrase, “không biết thế nào mà tình được nữa.” UBKCHC Liên tỉnh Sơn-Lai, “Báo cáo...” 1950, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 309, p. 5.

<sup>157</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, French and Federation militaries forced residents in contested areas to abandon their villages and submit to relocation, “concentrating” scattered settlements into more easily surveilled “large villages” (*gros villages*); many villagers chose, instead, flight to the forest or Laos. Cf., Đặng Nghiêâm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm on displacement and how, once village populations had been resettled, French and Federation forces waged a scorched earth campaign (1979: 141).

depth imbuing relationships formed over the previous years; and, certainly, the difficulty that this relationship entailed for those who labored on its behalf. Yet subsequent passages seem to imply that, for regional leaders at least, the affection was not returned. The report reserves praise for cadres who demonstrated “extraordinary perseverance” in face of many hardships, including a “poor and culturally backwards people.”<sup>158</sup> If the peoples of these mountains expressed some kind of affection for cadres and soldiers, the official report betrays a powerful expression of disaffection for them as mountain people.

The last archived report of the Son Lai Committee dates to November 1950 and provides a rejoinder to the above description. Under the heading of “political conditions in areas of armed struggle,” the report describes the consequences of people’s participation in revolutionary activities:

Initially, the masses were healthy and eager to struggle; after some time, they were cruelly repressed; they fled to the forest where they became hungry and cold, fell ill, and [found themselves in] miserable straits (eating tubers instead of rice year round means the tubers are also gone); there are places where two to three dozen people die of starvation...<sup>159</sup>

If cadres and soldiers escaped Thái Federation and French counterattacks by fleeing to safer base areas in Laos or the Việt Bắc, then the people they left behind suffered collectively for all their previous activities together.<sup>160</sup> Starvation and broader displacement only added to a list of severe consequences the local population already faced for allying themselves with Việt Minh and DRV.<sup>161</sup> The chilling depiction above

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<sup>158</sup> UBKCHC Liên tỉnh Sơn-Lai, “Báo cáo...” 1950, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 309, p. 14.

<sup>159</sup> Nguyễn Ba Kinh, “Báo cáo 3 tháng thứ III (7,8,9-1950),” 20 Nov 1950, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 309.

<sup>160</sup> An official Party history casts blame for food insecurity unreflexively: “Faced with enemy raids, the people’s production activities stopped.” Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên (2005), 83.

<sup>161</sup> A Sơn-Lai report stated, “if someone follows us, the French bandits will kill those remaining in the household; if a husband follows us, they will send 2-3 dozen soldiers to rape his wife.” Lò Văn Mười, “Báo cáo...” 21 Oct 1949, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 187, p. 38.

concludes this early period of organizing. Subsequent to this report, the Son-Lai Committee ceased reporting, indicating the degree to which the counterattack damaged the DRV's local infrastructure. The next archived report from this area comes two years later. This absence speaks loudly of discontinuity in the revolutionary program. It speaks as well to the silence of death.

## CHAPTER 4

### MAKING THE NORTHWEST

#### *Reorganization, centralization, expansion*

From World War II through the early 1950s, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam consistently recognized Thái leaders and configured their *muang*-based authority within institutions of state.<sup>1</sup> Just as DRV state formation did not always proceed as planned, attempts to configure state rule locally through Thái elites after 1952 demonstrates ongoing unsteadiness, tensions, and unintended consequences. If resuming the local configuration of state rule points to continuity in this period of state making, then the increased use of centrally-organized force beginning in late 1952 signaled one of several major changes. This chapter analyzes the spatial patterns and social consequences of making DRV rule in the Black River region and, in so doing, remaking it a national frontier.

Like the late 1940s, in 1952-54 Thái *muang* leaders not only figured prominently in their communities, they once again became recognized officials in institutions of DRV local and regional government. “Village politics contribute to making the state,” argues political anthropologist Anna Tsing, just as “the categories of state rule are actualized in local politics.” What she studies in the village, I attend to in multiple sites and scales of locally configured power. In line with her approach to Indonesian Borneo and the production of marginality there, my study of the Black River region also attends to what she calls “the subjective experience of being both outside and subject to state power.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, during the early 1950s Northwest Vietnam in general and Điện Biên Phủ in particular became—and still remain—

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<sup>1</sup> Legitimacy confers authority on power. Cf., Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, *The Great Arch* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 26.

centrally marginal places: figuring centrally in nationalist narratives and located on the margins of state power. How the Black River region came to be known and ruled as Northwest Vietnam was a contingent and contested outcome predicated on refiguring local Thái rule differently. Looking at Zimbabwe, Donald Moore analyzes similarly knotty “entanglements” produced and reproduced by the articulation between historically overlapping configurations of spatialized rule.<sup>3</sup> Like contemporary Zimbabwe, ruling relations in contemporary Vietnam emerge from a colonial past, build on legacies of violence, and incorporate historically divergent local rulers.

If this pattern of entangling and configuring state rule through village and *muang* politics continued, a significant shift appeared in late 1952. What changed was the rising state’s ability to secure its territorial claim to a self-proclaimed “Northwest Zone” through the coercive actions of the People’s Army. As such, it is important to examine this latter iteration of configuring state rule locally within the additional framework of militarized state expansionism.

During this period in the first Indochina War, from late 1952 through mid-1954, Vietnam was on the march in and around the Black River region. It was a violently expansionist political project: by defeating rival claimants, the People’s Army of Vietnam secured DRV claims to territory and subject populations. Organized coercion then enabled cadres to legitimate co-configured bureaucratic and traditional forms of power as state authority. “Liberation” (*giải phóng*), for example, figured prominently in their legitimation work as abstract idea, political project, and spatial category. Liberation became concrete—and highly contested—in the Black River region after its conquest by the People’s Army in late 1952. Indeed, to take the idea of militarized expansion seriously means thinking not only about territory but also about relations in space and their multiple transformations. Producing national state space

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Moore, *Suffering for Territory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 8-9.

(territory) was a project akin to, and inseparable from, producing state power itself: both were and remain mutually-constituted, contested, contingent, and transformative social processes.<sup>4</sup> I conceive of such spatial relations in terms of inclusion and exclusion in order to identify the mutable boundaries regulating who ruled where, on what terms, and to what effect. Theoretically, this entails a study of boundary-making. I analyze relations of domination through the mutual construction of complex entities—such as, emergent “Government” (*Chính phủ*), “Party” (*Đảng*), “ethnicity/nation” (*dân tộc/quốc gia*), “people” (*nhân dân*)—used to legitimize and enact forms of rule and ruling.<sup>5</sup>

By incorporating a historically simultaneous making of nation into an analysis of state-making, I build on Charles Tilly’s work on relations between war-making and state-making.<sup>6</sup> Just as war’s conduct required new institutions to coordinate and organize coercion, so too did leaders of these evolving institutions enact and centralize their power through coercive practices. I also build on Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Peluso’s work on the territorialization of state power.<sup>7</sup> Constructing state and feeding an army required scarce resources just as staking claims on labor and foodstocks transformed their production and circulation. To these insights into institutional reorganization and resource appropriation, I also attend to processes of legitimation. The idea of Vietnam was at once the grammar of legitimation (and Vietnamese its language), a militarized political project, and a socially produced communal effect.

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Lefebvre asserts that space is socially produced as a contested means and ends of political domination. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden argue that state power works through the mutually embedded medium (means) of, and produces the outcome (ends) of, territory—a historically specific, spatialized form of power equivalent to national state space (363). Cf., Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991), 10-11, 26; Brenner and Elden, “Henri Lefebvre on State, Space, Territory,” *International Political Sociology*, 3 (2009), 353-377.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics,” *American Political Science Review* vol. 85 no. 1(1991), 77-96; Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Peter Vandergeest and Nancy Peluso, “Territorialization and State Power in Thailand,” *Theory and Society* 24 (1995): 385-426.

The Vietnamese nation emerged through processes of configuring DRV territory as isomorphic with national communal space. What Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer observe for the emergence of modern England applies as well to the emergence of Vietnam after World War II: the making of nation was coeval with *and* inextricably linked to the making of state.<sup>8</sup> Militarized territorial expansion linked these two processes together, contributing to an unsteady, highly contested configuration of state and nation, or the country of “Vietnam.”<sup>9</sup> Making war in the Black River region during 1952-54, I argue, figured centrally in these co-configurations and entanglements. Not only did the People’s Army claim its territory for a rising DRV state, but questions of how to include or exclude its peoples as “Vietnamese” prompted a broader remaking and regulation of unstable social boundaries in relation to territory.

In addition to a strengthened and reorganized coercive apparatus, what also changed during this phase of state formation was the power and intent of a reorganizing DRV state center. Mao Zedong’s victory in China transformed a broader political and strategic calculus with regards to the significance “great powers” accorded to the Indochina War. In January 1950, the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union formally recognized the DRV.<sup>10</sup> A month later, following France’s abandonment of the Indochinese Federation in favor of a “nationalist” (i.e., non-

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<sup>8</sup> Corrigan and Sayer (1985), 111.

<sup>9</sup> Following Edmund Leach on “Burma,” I use a frontier region to inquire critically into the unsteady union of nation and state and, with quotation marks, signal the constructedness of “Vietnam.” “On the Frontiers of ‘Burma,’” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3 (1960): 49-68. I aim also to denaturalize the “nation-state” construct by attending to power and its self-representations critically. Cf., Begoña Aretxaga, “Maddening States,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32 (2003): 393-410.

<sup>10</sup> In Sept-Oct 1950, the People’s Army attacked French posts in Tonkin’s northeast in the Borderland Campaign, opening an overland link stretching from Cao Bằng to Lạng Sơn and into China’s Guangxi. A year later, completion of a rail link from Liuchow, to Nanning, and ending at Chen-nan-kuan—across from Lạng Sơn—facilitated increasing flows of armaments, advisors, etc. For Chinese aid, cf., King Chen *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), Ch 5; for a response, cf., Greg Lockhart’s *Nation in Arms* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1989), Ch 7; for a reappraisal, cf., Qiang Zhai, *China & the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000), Chs 1 and 2.

communist) solution, the United States recognized the Associated State of Vietnam led by former emperor Bảo Đại. Diplomatic recognitions enabled France and the DRV to gain access to respective sources of material, logistical, and strategic support.<sup>11</sup> Thus did a colonial conflict become enmeshed in a broader Cold War—and one of its hottest spots.

In response to these international developments, what the rising Party Secretary Trường Chinh called “major changes in the world following World War II,” the Indochinese Communist Party convened its Second Congress in February 1951.<sup>12</sup> Held in the Việt Bắc base area in Tuyên Quang Province, the occasion marked its first overt activity since the ICP’s (supposed) dissolution in November, 1945.<sup>13</sup> With 200 Party members in attendance from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the delegates passed a resolution to dissolve and divide into 3 national branches. The Vietnam Workers’ Party (*Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam*) was officially inaugurated.<sup>14</sup>

The public inauguration of the Vietnam Workers’ Party (VWP) signified the ascendance of a radical socialist Party within emerging relations of state rule. The Party officially stepped from the shadows to embrace a Marxist-Leninist program and to proclaim leadership, and prompt reorganization, of three other institutional forms: DRV state institutions, mass organizations, and the military.<sup>15</sup> The DRV state

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<sup>11</sup> On international diplomacy, aid flows, and the transformation of a colonial conflict into a “Cold War” hotspot, cf., Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery, *Indochina: An Ambiguous Colonization, 1858-1954* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 364-367; Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Mark Bradley, *Vietnam at War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Mark Lawrence and Fredrik Logevall, eds., *The First Vietnam War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); George Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Anchor Books, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Trường Chinh, “Hoàn thành giải phóng dân tộc, phát triển dân chủ nhân dân, tiến tới chủ nghĩa xã hội,” *Văn kiện Đảng*, vol 12, yr 1951 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2001), 41.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the ICP’s “self-dissolution,” cf., Huỳnh Kim Khánh, *Vietnamese Communism, 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 328-333.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., Motoo Furuta, “The Indochina Communist Party’s Division into Three Parties: Vietnamese Communist Policy towards Cambodia and Laos, 1948-1951,” in Takashi Shiraishi and Furuta, eds., *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992), 143-164.

<sup>15</sup> Max Weber observes, “Parties aim precisely at influencing this staff, and if possible, to recruit from it party members.” “The Distribution of Power within the Political Community: Class, Status, Party,” in



followed the principle of democratic centralism in which territorialized administrative officials were, in theory, electorally accountable to the “people” while, in practice, executed orders issued by superior members of an enmeshed Party-state bureaucracy.<sup>16</sup> Democratic centralism (*nguyên tắc dân chủ tập trung*) ensured that the seat of ultimate power rested firmly at the center, one dominated by the VWP.<sup>17</sup> In March 1951, the Việt Minh Front officially joined with the Vietnam National League; the new Liên-Việt Front, led by the Party, formed the umbrella for revolutionary mass organizations.<sup>18</sup> The People’s Army of Vietnam remained the principle force waging “people’s war,” or armed struggle on behalf and alongside the popular political struggle. As Minister of Defense and Politburo member Võ Nguyên Giáp stated in 1951: “The military force is the Party’s essential arm for any political aim.”<sup>19</sup>

My interest in legitimation and forms of authority as well as issues of class, status, and party lead me to engage the ideas of Max Weber. I described above the emergence and co-configuration of entangled forms of traditional and bureaucratic

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*Economy and Society* vol 2, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 938.

<sup>16</sup> I preserve a distinction between the institutional forms of DRV (state) and VWP (Party) in order to differentiate what Kenneth MacLean calls “bureaucratic segments” of decision-making and organizational interests. Because I recognize that blurring boundaries between the two was an ideological effect, I reserve the term “Party-state” only for instances when institutional differences collapsed and converged. “The Arts of Disclosure” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2005), xv-xx.

<sup>17</sup> As General Secretary, Trường Chinh led the VWP’s highest institution, the Party’s Central Executive Committee (Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng). In between Congresses, this Committee functioned as the Party’s “supreme leading organ.” A smaller subset of senior Committee leaders formed the Politburo (Bộ chính trị) who, in turn, joined other Committee leaders in the Prime Minister’s Secretariat (Phủ thủ tướng) to implement Central Committee decisions; many cited documents come from the PTTg file. Together, these bodies formed the institutional nexus known as the Central Government (Chính phủ trung ương). Though Hồ Chí Minh was DRV President (Chủ tịch), Deputy Prime Minister (Phó Thủ tướng) Phạm Văn Đồng conducted much of the Central Government’s day-to-day business. Cf., *Văn kiện Đảng* vol. 12 year 1951 (2001), 105-106; Gareth Porter *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Centralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 15, 67.

<sup>18</sup> The Việt Minh (Việt Nam độc lập đồng minh) joined with the Liên Việt (Hội Liên hiệp quốc dân Việt Nam) to make the Mặt Trận Liên-Việt. *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, vol 6, yrs 1950-52 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 1995), 181-182, fn 649. The new Liên-Việt Front included the Issarak Khmer and Issara Lao, indicating intent to operate in all of Indochina. Cf., Brocheux and Hémery (2009), 366.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Bernard Fall, *The Viet Minh Regime* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1956), 81.

authority in village and *muang* leadership.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Weber's ideas on class, status, and party help to understand the DRV's emergent institutional forms, their relations to emerging class power, as well as the underlying, and still evolving, Party agenda.<sup>21</sup> If the VWP "reside[d] in a sphere of power" and used emerging state institutions to "dominate a community," then in early 1950s "Vietnam" they *and* a target community were locked in a contested process of constituting one another mutually. In other words, where and whom these institutions dominated were multiply uncertain, destabilizing what Weber calls an "existing dominion." Indeed, for some time, the People's Army fought the French Expeditionary forces for control of an ambiguous dominion—Indochina or Vietnam?<sup>22</sup> If Vietnam, then who was Vietnamese? The Party did propose a Weberian "ideal cause" to transform class and status hierarchies. Yet the VWP agenda was neither stable nor evenly applied. Rather, the Party cause evolved during highly mutable historical conditions and by incorporating or suppressing multiple social movements. As a result, its application was contingent on the unsteady making, unmaking, and remaking of community and territory.

Trường Chinh's February 1951 address as rising Party Secretary provides the most complete vision of social revolution and the VWP's vanguard role.<sup>23</sup> His speech described the Vietnamese revolution as "a people's national democratic revolution": national for its fight against imperialism, democratic for its aim to abolish feudalism, popular for its representation of worker and peasant interests.<sup>24</sup> "National liberation,"

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<sup>20</sup> Max Weber, "The Types of Legitimate Domination" (1978), 212-302.

<sup>21</sup> Weber, "Class, Status, Party," pp. 180-195 in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, trans. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946); Weber (1978), 926-940.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam or Indochina? Contesting Concepts of Space in Vietnamese Nationalism, 1887-1954* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Originally titled, "Luận cương cách mạng Việt Nam" (Thesis on the Vietnamese Revolution). Reprinted in *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 12, yr 1951 (2001), 40-175 as "Completely liberate the nation, develop the people's democracy, advance to socialism." For an English translation, cf., "On the Vietnamese Revolution," *Trường Chinh: Selected Writings* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1994), 279-426.

<sup>24</sup> Or, "Cách mạng dân tộc dân chủ nhân dân." "Hoàn thành..." *Văn kiện Đảng* yr 1951 (2001), 82, 88; Trường Chinh (1994), 334.

or the defeat of colonial rule, was the primary and over-riding goal.<sup>25</sup> Even if peasants (*nông dân*) constituted 90% of the population and contributed much to the movement, he argued that their adherence to an individualistic mode of production and possession of private property meant that they must follow working class leadership. Though small in number (4% of pop.), the proletariat (*công nhân*) owned nothing but their labor and, hence, the Party considered them—and counted themselves as—most committed to revolutionary struggle against the combined weight of foreign imperialism and domestic feudalism. Together, the workers and peasants formed “the people” (*nhân dân*), a political alliance he based on ascribed class affinity. Trường Chinh predicted that the revolution, in its progression from a bourgeois democratic revolution to a socialist one, would move through three phases: to achieve national liberation, eliminate feudal exploitation, and prepare for socialism.<sup>26</sup>

Although the enmeshed Party-state would pursue each step in turn over the next decade, smashing feudalism and, not coincidentally, the agrarian reform agenda followed a different path in the Black River region than elsewhere in a real or potential DRV. Incorporating a local elite and reconfiguring their roles within state posed a contradiction with regards to the revolutionary agenda. I emphasize how ostensible “feudal” local rule persisted in an emerging “Northwest Vietnam” during, and in spite of, the making of an ostensibly egalitarian “Vietnam.” This spatial un-evenness has historiographic and analytical ramifications. I argue that the idea of rupture supposedly achieved in 1954 between an “exploitative” colonial past and a “liberated”

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<sup>25</sup> Furuta (1992), 159. Cf., Võ Nguyên Giáp, *National Liberation War in Vietnam* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1971).

<sup>26</sup> Or, “first, eliminate the foreign imperialists, liberate the people, strengthen the democratic State; second, wipe out feudal vestiges, implement land reform, fledge out the people’s democracy; fulfill the people’s democracy and create the conditions for advancing to socialism.” “Hoàn thành...” *Văn kiện Đảng* yr 1951 (2001), 88. Patricia Pelley analyzes how these three stages build on Joseph Stalin’s five-stage model of historical development. *Postcolonial Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 46-53. Cf., Stalin, “Dialectical and Historical Materialism,” in *Problems of Leninism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 835-873.

national present/future conceals the remaking of social relations that belie any neat divide between bondage and freedom or, for that matter, between state and society.

While Trường Chinh's address articulated a revolutionary program guided by Marxist-Leninist principles and led by a national Party, a crucial question emerges in his speech which, tellingly, remains partially obscured. Where did central elites proposing a nation-state locate its boundaries? The question arises in two different discussions, regarding both the role of Vietnam in Indochina and the place of communal forms in and of Vietnam. First, how did and how would the DRV treat territorial borders established during the colonial era? Where were the spatial limits of the national liberation movement? Trường Chinh referred to this spatial issue as the "Lao question." Second, how did and how would the DRV categorize subjects over which it claimed dominion? On what terms did national community include or exclude forms of social difference? Trường Chinh referred to this social issue as the "ethnic question." Whether the question of boundaries is conceived of as external (as spatial border) or internal (as social boundary) to the rising nation-state, either conception bears directly on the Black River region's territory and population.<sup>27</sup>

This chapter is organized according to a roughly historical sequence with analytical properties. I track how an emergent state staked a claim to territory and enforced its power through space, place, and land. Led by the VWP, the DRV renewed a claim on the Black River region by imagining its singular authority there. As such, Trường Chinh and other central elites imported the region into abstract state *space*. Once the military enforced this monopoly claim (but did not yet fully secure it), cadres and soldiers set about integrating and consolidating *place* into a (seemingly) uniform

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<sup>27</sup> If Weber discusses "frontiers of politics" or "state boundaries" with respect to already given "territorial dominion" and "existing polity," then this study focuses on the political processes of making boundaries in and of a socio-spatial frontier. Weber (1946), 195; Weber (1978), 939.

grid of institutions, policies, and practices.<sup>28</sup> Peluso and Vandergeest contend that the “lack of fit” between abstract space and lived place contributes to the “instability of the territorial strategies of the modern state.”<sup>29</sup> Extending the discussion of space and place to include contests over land further illustrates this instability and points to re-emerging relations of local rule.

Rather than think about land as a thing, to be divided and allocated, I consider the evolving social relations of land in relation to rising state power. Not reforming relations of land in the Black River region, I argue, reproduced local relations of production and rule which, in turn, structured the boundaries and capacities of state power. Thinking of the social production of space, place, and land relationally and together illustrates the contested remaking of a frontier. As the chapter moves from policy discussions at a reorganizing center to constructing a local bureaucracy and debating land reform on an emerging frontier—from centrally-imagined space, to administered place, to land lived and worked—I aim to highlight how the process of making and remaking relations of rule became more entangled and more contested.

### ***The Lao Question and the Northwest in Vietnam***

“The level of Vietnam,” stated Trường Chinh in the opening line of his address to the 2<sup>nd</sup> ICP Congress in February 1951, “is different from the level of Cambodia and Laos regarding each aspect of economy, politics, society, and culture.” By

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<sup>28</sup> Lefebvre reminds us that each spatial category is produced socially (1991). Instead of his unwieldy analytical language (spatial practices, representation of space, representational space), I prefer terms of space, place, and land. Although space and place are both sites of contested power and ongoing social construction, I differentiate them analytically to illustrate subtly divergent processes. Space is an imagined expanse, much like Thongchai Winichakul’s “geobody,” where bounded social relations transcend time, pretending towards universality and uniformity. Place implies a similarly bounded but particular set of social relations fraught with contingency and caught up in historical circumstance. Land refers to relations of agrarian production and social reproduction. Cf., Tuan Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 6, 17-18; Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 4-11; Thongchai, *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Vandergeest and Peluso (1995), 389.

“different level,” the Party Secretary implied that the Vietnamese revolution had achieved a more advanced stage of development, a fact he demonstrated by pointing to the founding of the Democratic Republic. Although they shared “a common enemy in French colonialism and American interventionism,” recognition of “different revolutionary conditions” in Laos and Cambodia, he explained, prompted the ICP to divide into three separate parties.<sup>30</sup>

Reorganizing nationally, however, should not indicate that leaders and members of the Vietnam Workers’ Party intended to reduce what they now considered “international” (*quốc tế*) involvement in Indochina. Rather, the ICP’s division was accompanied by the VWP’s renewed political and military commitment to support companion *national* revolutionary movements in Laos and Cambodia. “Vietnamese communists,” stated Trường Chinh, “do not take lightly their own international duties, especially the duty to help the Cambodian and Laotian revolutions.”<sup>31</sup> The number of cadres sent from Vietnam to strengthen party organizations in Cambodia and Laos grew steadily over the course of the war.<sup>32</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, cross-border organizing and military action were already everyday activities on the Lao/Viet-Tonkin border. Indeed, the second Congress reaffirmed the ICP’s decision of a year earlier and echoed what General Giáp considered a crucial strategy: to conduct war on “the single battlefield” of Indochina.<sup>33</sup>

The People’s Army of Vietnam’s subsequent military campaigns revealed the

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<sup>30</sup> “Hoàn thành...” *Văn kiện Đảng* yr 1951 (2001), 82. Note that the section discussing relations between Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam is not included in Truong (1994), 282.

<sup>31</sup> “Hoàn thành...” *Văn kiện Đảng* yr 1951 (2001), 40-41.

<sup>32</sup> From 500-700 in 1946-47, to 5000-7000 in 1950-51, up to 17,000 in 1953. Furuta (1992), 157-161. For more on Cambodian (*Khmer Issarak*) and Laotian (*Neo Lao Issara*) revolutionary parties, cf., Goscha (1995); Nina Adams and Alfred McCoy, eds., *Laos: War and Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Paul Langer and Joseph Zasloff, *North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> This decision did not always sit well with Laotian and Cambodian radicals who chafed at relying on Vietnamese “brothers” in a manner similar to the way Vietnamese radicals chafed at depending on Chinese assistance. Christopher Goscha, *Thailand and the Southeast Asian Networks of the Vietnamese Revolution (1885-1954)* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 345-348.

significance of Laos to Vietnam's national revolution and, in turn, renewed emphasis on securing Tonkin's northwest. In April 1953, the People's Army launched a campaign on this "Indochinese battlefield" against French forces stationed in Laos, a maneuver cloaked in official secrecy. "Our attitude regarding the Lao question," Trường Chinh instructed Party members, "is to do much and speak little, or just do it but don't speak."<sup>34</sup>

What was the value of this terrain? Officially, the People's Army set out to "assist" their revolutionary allies, the Pathet Lao, by clearing a base area for the latter to operate safely and stage guerilla warfare. Yet other reasons suggest themselves. Expanding the battlefield dispersed French forces over a wide area and lessened their strength in Vietnam.<sup>35</sup> The timing in mid-spring overlapped with the opium harvest in the Laotian highlands.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the "liberated" Lao territory—an enormous swath stretching from Phongsaly, through Sam Neua, to Xiang Khoang—bordered territory in what was, by then, claimed as Vietnam's own "Northwest."<sup>37</sup> "By helping the people of an allied country," wrote Hồ Chí Minh in a letter to People's Army combatants in Laos, "it means we are helping ourselves."<sup>38</sup> In other words, even if the three countries of Indochina formed a single anti-colonial battlefield, Vietnam's national revolution was for and of itself.<sup>39</sup> Just as Indochina became a site of "international" struggle, the "Northwest" became a strategic site to internalize a frontier zone and to regulate the borders of national territory.

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<sup>34</sup> Or, "...cứ làm mà không nói." The sensitivity regarding Vietnam's intent in Laos is made clear in Trường Chinh's instructions on how *not* to speak of "Vietnam's voluntary army in Laos" or "help from the people or military of Vietnam" but, rather, to refer to a "spirit of unity between Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos." "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư về việc tuyên truyền Chiến dịch Thượng Lào," 4 May 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng*, vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 199-200.

<sup>35</sup> Furuta (1992), 161.

<sup>36</sup> Goscha (1995), 143.

<sup>37</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, *Lịch sử cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp, 1945-1954*, vol II (NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1995), 234-248.

<sup>38</sup> "Thư gửi đơn vị bộ đội ta có nhiệm vụ tác chiến ở Thượng Lào," *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, vol 7, yr 1953-1955 (1996), 64.

<sup>39</sup> Furuta (1992: 161) reaches a similar conclusion.

Through the processes of institutional reorganization and preparation for renewed military struggle, the “Northwest” of Vietnam emerged as an imagined administrative unit with concrete Party leadership. In a letter to the Minister of Defense dated September 1951, Chief of Staff Major General Hoàng Văn Thái forwarded the Việt Bắc Interzone Administrative Committee’s recommendation that the Son-Lai Interprovince be re-split into its constituent provinces.<sup>40</sup> Reflecting on the “general counteroffensive” launched in 1950, the Chief of Staff explained that the interprovincial military command had failed by paying “too much attention to Son La.” Further, he argued that there were too few cadres to work in the region’s “too vast area” and among “backwards people.” The over-emphasis on Son La meant that, “by early 1950, it was as though Lai Châu knew nothing about the Government of Vietnam... and our influence [among the people] amounts to nothing.” Any uprisings that occurred in Lai Châu were “scattered,” such as the “struggle” of 3,000 Hmong people there in late 1950.<sup>41</sup> Finally, the population’s alleged “persistent backwardness” (*trình độ còn lạc hậu*) combined with divisive French policies to the extent that “...the Black Thái people (Son La) and the White Thái people (Lai Châu) still have prejudice and hate one another.” In order to gain the trust of Lai Châu’s people, he proposed creating independent provincial commands, administrative committees, and “Organization” (i.e., Party) cells.<sup>42</sup>

On 12 January 1952, Vice Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng supported the Chief of Staff’s analysis by issuing a decision to divide the provinces “like before”

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<sup>40</sup> Thiếu tướng Hoàng Văn Thái, “Ý kiến về việc tách tỉnh Sơn Lai thành hai tỉnh Sơn La và Lai Châu,” 14 Sept 1951, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1145.

<sup>41</sup> Why the movement happened is left unsaid. See my earlier analysis of a contested and ethnicized political-economy in the Thái Federation, particularly regarding Hmong cultivation of opium.

<sup>42</sup> Although the ICP’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress meant VWP activities were public, he nonetheless adhered to a policy of secrecy and referred to the VWP in code, as the “Organization” (*Đoàn thể*). Thiếu tướng Hoàng Văn Thái, “Ý kiến...” 14 Sept 1951, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1145.



and keeping them within the Việt Bắc Interzone's bailiwick.<sup>43</sup> Like so many other changes in territorial administration, however, Phạm Văn Đồng's decision to split Sơn La and Lai Châu only foreshadowed more administrative shuffling. If many of these changes followed colonial boundaries, they also declared the Party-state's intent to wrest control of the region's territory and population from the Thái Federation.

On 17 July 1952, the Secretary's Council of the Party's Central Committee established the Northwest Zone (*Khu Tây Bắc*).<sup>44</sup> The Zone included four provinces that, heretofore, had been included in the Việt Bắc Interzone: Sơn La, Lai Châu, Yên Bái, and Lào Cai.<sup>45</sup> The boundaries of this politico-military unit mirrored the French Expeditionary Force's own ZANO (*Zone Autonome Nord-Ouest*) which was designed to defend the Thái Federation and guard a gateway to Laos.<sup>46</sup> Like the French unit, the cartographic referent was Hanoi, to which this zone lay west by northwest. Yet it was France, and not Vietnam, which still had *de facto* control over both the Northwest and the urban center to which it referred.

The Party's Central Committee provided two rationales, one familiar and another new, to justify the creation of the "Northwest" territorial unit. The July 1952 order cited the Zone's "vast area, sparse people," the former of which "is temporarily occupied" and the latter "are almost all ethnic minorities."<sup>47</sup> By echoing a language of "vast area, sparse people" (*đất rộng, người thưa*), central decision-makers accepted a

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<sup>43</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, Phó Thủ tướng, Nghị định số 145-TTg, 12 Jan 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1145.

<sup>44</sup> The Northwest Zone was also known in code as Khu 20 (XX) or Khu QT (Quang Trung). "Nghị quyết của Ban Bí thư thành lập Khu Tây Bắc," 17 July 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol. 13, yr 1952 (2001), 210-213; Đảng LĐVN, Ban chấp hành khu Tây Bắc, "Tình hình Tây Bắc và nhiệm vụ năm 1953 trong hội nghị cán bộ (từ 22 đến 27/2/53)," March 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471.

<sup>45</sup> The newly created region's eastern boundaries were unclear, i.e. whether or not Yên Bái and Lào Cai provinces straddled the Red River (as they did from 1975 to now); or whether they ended in the heights of its western bank (as the Thái-Mèo and Northwest Autonomous Zones did from 1955-1975).

<sup>46</sup> John T. McAlister, "Mountain Minorities and The Viet Minh: A Key to The Indochina War," pp. 771-844 in Peter Kunstadter, ed. *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 803-804.

<sup>47</sup> "Nghị quyết..." 17 July 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 210.

particular frontier discourse. They also reproduced its underlying ideology: (mis)representing the contested and fractious Black River region as unified and attached to yet somehow different from Vietnam. That the order ascribed to its people an “ethnic minority” status signifies a rising national consciousness: similar enough to be counted as Vietnamese but somehow different enough to be called “ethnic.”

If reproducing a frontier discourse signaled national domination, then the order’s accompanying instructions foreshadowed sustained military occupation. Departing from the January 1950 decision to de-emphasize territorial control there, the July 1952 order cited the Northwest Zone as an “important and strategic region now and later.” Consequently, the socio-spatial dimension of organizing activities shifted. No longer would cadres only “hang around” (*quanh quẩn*) montane Hmong and Dao communities like they had, presumably, during the period (1950-1952) following the abandonment of *muang*-based Administrative Committees in Sơn La. Now, in addition, cadres would “develop”—or, rather, re-establish—relationships among “dense and populous” settlements, i.e. among the valley-dwelling Thái.<sup>48</sup> This shift signaled a renewed commitment to confront and displace the Thái Federation on the same populated terrain where the latter concentrated military activities and recruited elite support.

The Secretary’s Committee, referring to itself as the “Center,” empowered the Northwest Zonal Party Committee (*Khu ủy Tây Bắc*) to lead the newly constituted region’s “military, people, government, and Party cells.” Composed of between 5-7 members chosen by the “Center,” the order specified that the Northwest Party Committee “prioritize military duties above all else” and to “prepare the battlefield.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư Thị hành chính sách dân tộc thiểu số ở Khu Q.T.,” 16 Aug 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 245.

<sup>49</sup> The order allowed for election of its members at a later date. Nguyễn Kháng (aka, Bùi Quang Tạo) was elected Political Commisar (*chính ủy*) and Committee Secretary, Vũ Nhất (aka, Học) became Deputy Political Commisar, and Bằng Giang Military Commander. “Nghị quyết...” 17 July 1952, *Văn*

Prioritizing the war effort fit a broader pattern of institutional reorganization and ongoing preparation for another Northwest Campaign.<sup>50</sup> The long-term goal of this Zonal Committee was to provide leadership for “resistance and nation-state building” (*kháng chiến, kiến quốc*). The Zonal Committee was granted responsibility for activities encompassing military, police, economy, finance, and education as well as construction and oversight of Administrative and Resistance Committees. In particular, Party elites ordered the regional committee to (re)build political infrastructure, prepare people to serve the front, train cadres, and implement the Party’s evolving “Ethnic Policy.”<sup>51</sup>

The VWP’s central leaders created the Northwest Party Committee shortly before the former issued a version of “Ethnic Policy,” empowering the new institution to regulate the Black River population with respect to an emergent social category of “ethnicity.” The policy delineated ethnicity’s relationship to class struggle and specified how the institution should form new alliances on behalf of “the people.”<sup>52</sup> Recall that “the people” (*nhân dân*) was conceived as a political alliance between proletarians and peasants. Because, ostensibly, there were no proletarians among “ethnic minorities,” the Party’s August 1952 Ethnic Policy advocated the broad mobilization of so-called minorities as peasants, regardless of their position among the “base” or “upper class.”<sup>53</sup> Except for clearly traitorous members of the upper class whose transgressions merited public trials, the policy advocated “winning [them]

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*kiện Đảng* vol. 13, yr 1952 (2001), 211; Cao Văn Lượng et al, eds., *Lịch sử Kháng chiến chống Thực dân Pháp của Quân và Dân Khu Tây Bắc (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 2003), 339-340.

<sup>50</sup> The Central Government reformed Party, state, and military institutions at “each level,” ordered re-education (*chỉnh huấn*) of political personnel, and commanded them to prioritize the war effort above all else. Ban nghiên cứu lịch sử Đảng Lai-Châu, *Ba mươi năm Phấn đấu và Xây dựng của Đảng bộ Lai Châu* (Lai Châu, 1980), 42; Cao Văn Lượng et al, eds. (2003), 287.

<sup>51</sup> “Nghị quyết...” 17 July 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 210-213; “Chỉ thị...” 16 Aug 1952, *ibid.*... 247-248.

<sup>52</sup> “Chính sách dân tộc thiểu số của Đảng hiện nay (Nghị quyết Bộ Chính trị),” Aug 1952, *Văn Kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 259-282; “Chỉ thị...” 16 Aug 1952, *Ibid.* 241-258.

<sup>53</sup> The former included “middle, poor, landless peasants” (*trung, bản, cố nông*) and the latter, “hereditary nobles, village heads, Thai ruling class, càrá [?]” (*thổ ty, lang đạo, phìa, tạo, càrá*).

over” (*tranh thủ*) towards a “great unity” because the elite “still has much influence among mountain people.”<sup>54</sup>

If the Ethnic Policy emphasized nation over class and status and prioritized unity over social transformation, then an accompanying order specified how the Northwest Committee should implement this policy in practical terms. Regarding the composition of local government at province, district, and commune units, Administrative Committees “need” (*cần*) to include three forms of representation: from each “ethnicity”; from select grades of peasants (landless, poor, middle); and from “hereditary nobles” (*thổ ty*) and Thái elites (*phìa, châu*).<sup>55</sup> Perhaps because the emphasis on building alliances with “feudal strata” (*tầng lớp phong kiến*) must have appeared jarring to cadres committed to social revolution, the orders were very clear: incorporate elites “who have status among the people” because “*we also need them to participate in local government, though we must help and re-educate (cải tạo) them.*”<sup>56</sup> Even allegedly “feudal exploitation,” such as the *cuông* practice of bonded labor, was exempt from any immediate “limitation.” The order required cadres interested in “eradicating” any such practices to submit requests to the Northwest Party Committee which, in turn, forwarded its findings to the “Center” which, finally, would issue a ruling.<sup>57</sup> For the time being, the policies advocated leaving class-inflected, social hierarchies intact in order for cadres to take advantage of elite power and social influence, to harness them to the national cart of anti-colonial struggle.

In sum, the Central Party empowered the Northwest Committee, in Weberian terms, to “dominate a community,” raising two important issues that I explore.<sup>58</sup> First,

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<sup>54</sup> “Chính sách...” Aug 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 270.

<sup>55</sup> The peasantry’s gradations included *phú nông* (wealthy/kulak), *trung nông* (middle), *bần nông* (poor), *cổ nông* (landless). “Chỉ thị...” 16 Aug 1952 *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13 yr 1952 (2001), 247-249.

<sup>56</sup> Italics added. *Ibid.* 248.

<sup>57</sup> “Chỉ thị...” 16 August 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 249.

<sup>58</sup> Weber (1946), 180-195.

how the people of the new Northwest fit territorially and socially into “a” community—i.e., a singular nation—was still a matter of debate. Second, domination always involves legitimation. Indeed, the Northwest Committee’s mission self-consciously incorporated legitimation work: the “Center” ordered the immediate establishment of two sub-committees concerned with propaganda, one on ideological training among cadres (*Tuyên huấn*) and another on popular agitation (*Dân vận*).<sup>59</sup> As Kim Ninh notes, “propaganda” (*tuyên truyền*) in Vietnamese at this time did not carry the negative associations (i.e., brainwashing) that it does in contemporary English. Rather, she defines the way propaganda operated in Vietnam as an “effort to broadcast the revolutionary message to the public through persuasion.”<sup>60</sup> I think of propaganda as a state effort to educate the public about itself and the Party’s leading role. In short, propaganda was legitimation work.

The creation of two propaganda sub-committees indicates the degree to which Central Party leaders accorded priority to gaining support through political persuasion. What conditions did they encounter? On the one hand, historic and ongoing Thái Federation rule forestalled DRV legitimation work in Lai Châu. Recall Hoàng Văn Thái’s observation of Lai Châu where in late 1950 the “people knew nothing about the Government of Vietnam.” Another document from this time further indicates the difficulties of legitimation work.<sup>61</sup> Lai Châu’s people said the “French” were “good” for selling salt and cloth and providing shelter. On the other hand, Sơn La posed different problems. Organizing activities there had attracted popular support for two years until DRV military priorities shifted in late 1950, leaving participants undefended against French counterattacks and Thái Federation reprisals. By 1952,

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<sup>59</sup> “Nghị quyết...” 17 July 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 211.

<sup>60</sup> Kim Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 74, 171.

<sup>61</sup> Anonymous, “Dự thảo đề án phát triển chiến tranh du kích và củng cố cơ sở chính trị năm 1952,” year 1951, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1125.

former supporters in Son La must have felt abandoned, even embittered. Indeed, people there felt a broad sense of “anxiety” and expressed “pessimism” regarding projected outcomes. They countered with disarmingly simple questions, such as: “Why do enemies re-occupy areas of certain victory?” When residents learned about the Black River’s strategic role in the counteroffensive of 1950-51, they reacted with “suspicion” towards loose-lipped cadres and, moreover, towards “the government.”<sup>62</sup>

In response to these legitimation problems, a revised curriculum instructed cadres to meet local residents at their level, to nudge them along towards a higher level of “revolutionary awareness” (*giác ngộ*). Officials fretted that many people in the Black River region did not know how to answer—to their liking—questions such as, “Who is the enemy? Who is the friend?”<sup>63</sup> Previously, cadres had allegedly failed to instill popular hatred (*căm thù*) for the French by exposing their “wicked plot.” As a result, the region’s multiple “ethnicities” only hated and blamed one another for “enemy intimidation,” such as burning homes, crop destruction, and raping women. As such, the content of propaganda shifted towards making a national “friend,” one dialectically recognized in opposition to a foreign “enemy.” By teaching people to distinguish between friend and foe, cadres led a lesson on their own regime’s legitimacy.<sup>64</sup> Questions about loyalty during a time of violent conflict, however, are

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<sup>62</sup> Anon., “Dự thảo ...” 1951, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1125.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> The revolutionaries appeared to embrace the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt for whom the foundational concept for “the political” lay in an oppositional difference between friend and enemy, the recognition of which creates a sphere for a public to form against a threat, to become a “combating collectivity.” Jacques Derrida argues that Schmitt’s logic rests on an *a priori* distinguishability between friend and enemy, a presupposed border between categories which are, in practice, uncertain, unstable, and malleable. Further, Derrida identifies a telos, a Hegelian overdetermination of politics with its state form which privileges state as the locus of “the political.” Regarding the friend/enemy discourse in DRV propaganda, what is remarkable is precisely the uncertainty and hesitation with which Black River residents greeted the eminently *polemical* distinction offered by cadres. Among this population, the multiplicity and temporality of identities, allegiances, and loyalties disrupts and destabilizes a determinist logic predicated on stable bifurcations (friend/enemy; citizen/foreigner; civil war/interstate war, etc.). Cf., Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (New York: Verso), esp. 84-87, 112-120.

never easy to answer because, in order to survive, one's response depends on who does the asking. Furthermore, the binary categories themselves did not allow for the kinds of gray areas—colonial bureaucrats recognized as DRV officials, for example—that years of warfare produced among the many peoples of the Black River.

At this point in mid-1952 the Party decision to create the Northwest Zone expressed a dual ambition: both to annex the Thái Federation's territory and to re-orient relations of rule there towards the Party's own rising center. The spatial boundaries of the newly created Northwest Zone followed those inherited from, and still defended by, the Thái Federation. During the Northwest Military Campaign from October to December 1952, the Zone's Party Committee was the Party's—and DRV's—superior regional institution. Only on 28 January 1953 did President Hồ Chí Minh sign a decree formally establishing the Northwest Zone and creating an accompanying Resistance and Administrative Committee.<sup>65</sup> Evidently, the VWP was seizing the initiative in military and civilian affairs by constructing institutions, regulating political relations, and staking claims to territory—all of which were recognized later by, and as, the Democratic Republic. The Party would do the same on the crucial question of how ethnicity, and how peoples of the imagined Northwest, figured in a Vietnamese nation.

### ***Spaces and peoples within: autonomy and the making of national ethnic minorities***

In what terms did DRV and Party leaders imagine the people or peoples of an emergent Vietnam? How did territory figure into their powerful construction of, and

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<sup>65</sup> Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh, SL-134, 28 Jan 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1268.

boundary demarcation between, ideas of ethnicity and nation?

To understand how political leaders reconstructed multiple peoples to fit, uncomfortably, into a singular people, it is useful to revisit the idea of “*dân tộc*.”<sup>66</sup> The concept troubled historical actors and its translation is revealingly problematic for contemporary analysts. The compound word combines two Sino-Vietnamese roots: “*dân*” or social person, member of a community; and “*tộc*” or type, ethnos, relation. How does one render this combination in English—as nation, ethnicity, or nationality?<sup>67</sup> The term appears to be a Vietnamese exemplar of what Katharine Verdery calls, “kinds of people,” or a typology according to which nationalist ideologies “sort the world” in relation to an “actual or potential political entity.” She argues that nation and ethnicity, although similar as signifiers of community and bearers of a shared kinship idiom, display distinct genealogies. Historically, the construct “nation” is defined at the level of state while “ethnicity” occupies a lower order, something akin to, “tribes,” she writes, “to be managed during the process of state consolidation.”<sup>68</sup> Verdery identifies both a hierarchy of communal categories by which state-makers organize social difference as well as a relational and historical method for disentangling the highly mutable meanings of *dân tộc*.

Likewise, Kim Ninh and Patricia Pelley argue for understanding *dân tộc* within its historical context and trace its permutations. Drawing on written texts from the 1920s through 1940s, Kim Ninh traces the development of “*dân tộc*” from

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<sup>66</sup> I echo and amend a question posed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Ce qui fait qu’un peuple est un peuple?” Or, what makes a people a people? “On the Social Contract,” in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans., Donald Cress (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), 147. For a treatment of this question, its philosophical genealogy, and its political (and highly ideological) valence, cf., Etienne Balibar, “What makes a people a people? Rousseau and Kant,” in *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere*, ed. Mike Hill and Warren Montag (New York: Verso, 2000), 105-131.

<sup>67</sup> Phan Văn Các, *Từ Điển Hán Việt* (TP Hồ Chí Minh: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2003), 116-117, 417. Viện Ngôn ngữ học, *Từ điển Việt-Anh* (TP Hồ Chí Minh: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2001), 195.

<sup>68</sup> Katherine Verdery, “Ethnicity, nationalism, and state-making,” in Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers, eds., *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond ‘Ethnic Groups and Boundaries’* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), 50.



“peoplehood” to “nation” or “nationhood.” These ideas all assumed meaning through debates on what it meant to be Vietnamese, touching on qualities in realms of culture and language but, she notes, not territory. By the mid-1940s, the concept gained heightened prominence, she writes, to connote what it meant to be “uniquely Vietnamese” yet still distinguished “ethnic and cultural-linguistic factors” from “territorial concerns.”<sup>69</sup> Carrying this work into the 1950s and beyond, Pelley traces *dân tộc*’s genealogy to vacillations between two sources often held apart, one revolutionary socialist and another colonial.<sup>70</sup> Its earlier meaning as “nation” she links to pre-World War II debates in the Soviet Union over how to achieve a viable mode of revolutionary solidarity, whether through class-based alliances and/or through communal affinities based on language, territory, and economic life.<sup>71</sup> Its later, and now dominant, meaning as “ethnicity” she links to a post-colonial ethnological project that aimed to organize and categorize forms of social difference within territory defined nationally. Notwithstanding an alleged break with French domination, national ideas of social difference and territorial boundaries reproduced colonial distinctions. Pelley observes that ongoing “linguistic confusion,” or oscillations between *dân tộc*’s meaning as “ethnicity” or “nation,” can be read to indicate real, unresolved tensions in reimagining Vietnam and Vietnamese-ness given “other” peoples who may not—and often do not—think of themselves in these terms. Yet a palpable shift did occur.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ninh (2002), 26-31, 90-91. Note her discussion of Trường Chinh’s *Theses on Culture* (1943) which, she argues, reframed *dân tộc* in terms of a potential, something to be salvaged and resurrected; in short, one can become Vietnamese through “*dân tộc hoá*,” or nationalization.

<sup>70</sup> Pelley (2002), 81-91.

<sup>71</sup> Cf., V.I. Lenin, “Theses on the National Question,” June 1913, *Collected Works*, vol 19 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), 243-251; Stalin, “Marxism and the National Question,” *Works*, vol 2 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 300-381; Walker Connor, *The National Question in Marxist-Leninist Theory and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>72</sup> My translations from Vietnamese to English, and the analysis which follows, are not meant to render these words with certainty for all time. Rather, I attempt both to convey something of their shared linguistic uncertainty regarding very slippery ideas; and to illustrate the discursive practices with which powerful (Vietnamese) speakers and writers intended to fix their meanings and regulate them as categories in order to advance a political program. Cf., Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

I posit that the first Indochina War presented state-makers with conditions, perceived as an imperative, to regulate the unstable boundaries between *dân tộc* and kindred communal forms. Shortly after Hồ Chí Minh declared the Democratic Republic in Ba Đình Square, warfare with returning French forces in 1946 forced him and an emerging group of lowland political elites to retreat north to the mountains. Removed from the familiarity of delta regions and relations, they endeavored to establish the Việt Bắc base area among different “kinds of people.” The elite’s collective displacement and resettlement in a new cultural and agro-ecological landscape forced reconsideration of what it meant to be Vietnamese or, for that matter, what it meant to be Kinh, Tày, Thái, Hmong, etc. Old forms of group identity and community—based on patterns of settlement, language, agricultural practice, cultural habit—mixed again in new historical conditions. It was a moment of renewed encounter between groups that, historically, had differentiated and formed in relation to one another.<sup>73</sup> Yet as the war entered a new phase, beginning in 1950, these encounters increasingly took place on unequal terms. Supplied with military aid from the recently-victorious People’s Republic of China, the People’s Army became a modern fighting force capable of claiming territory on behalf of the DRV. Adding territory to ideas of community forced another revision of *dân tộc*. State-makers and Party leaders embraced a self-proclaimed role to manage ambiguities stemming from questions of who belonged where in the communal space they called “Vietnam”—and on what terms.

Trường Chinh used his platform at the ICP’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress to address precisely these questions.<sup>74</sup> The VWP became one of three parties leading revolutionary movements in the “nations” or “states” (*quốc gia*) or “countries” (*nước*) of Vietnam,

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<sup>73</sup> David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 6-9; James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>74</sup> “Hoàn thành...” *Văn kiện Đảng*, vol 12, yr 1951 (2001), 40-175.

Laos, and Cambodia. He also declared that the primary task of Vietnam's revolution was "national liberation" (*giải phóng dân tộc*). Note the terminology. Like *dân tộc*, *quốc gia* is Sino-Vietnamese compound word with multiple meanings: as nation or country (*nước*), the two are very similar, indicating a community based on shared culture and origin; as state (*nhà nước*), the two depart ways because *quốc gia* indicates a form of modern rule predicated on sovereign territory.<sup>75</sup> How to distinguish them?

In a crucial passage called, "resolving the ethnicity question" (*giải quyết vấn đề dân tộc*), the Party Secretary ventured a solution: "Vietnam includes many *dân tộc*." The seemingly simple statement bore profound implications: at a stroke, he ranked communal forms and assigned them relations to state power. If Vietnam, defined as *quốc gia*, delineated the outer bounds of nationhood, then *dân tộc*, defined as ethnicity, demarcated a subsidiary form of difference within.<sup>76</sup> In this light, *quốc gia*'s slippage between nation and state simultaneously concealed and revealed an emergent form of rule, i.e. the so-called "nation-state." Trường Chinh simultaneously pointed to an emergent "nation" as the highest form of communal identity and enlisted it as a legitimating device for an evolving "state." On behalf of rising DRV institutions and reforming Workers' Party, Trường Chinh performed a powerful act: drawing, delineating, and ranking communal boundary lines; and assigning them a relation to state power.

Ranking communal forms allowed the Secretary to reposition ethnicity as an emergent category within the regulatory purview of a state legitimized nationally. Once he had relegated ethnicity (*dân tộc*) to a secondary status below nation (*quốc gia*), the Secretary continued:

Next to the Viet people, there are some ethnic minorities. There are

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<sup>75</sup> Note that *nước* literally means "water" and *nhà* "house"; together, they mean "state." Phan Văn Các (2003), 329; Viện Ngôn ngữ học (2001), 603.

<sup>76</sup> *Dân tộc* can also be thought of as nationality, itself a diminutive form of "nation."

some races (*chủng tộc*), of small population scattered about haphazardly like compatriots [who are] Mèo, Trại, Lô Lô, etc. There are some ethnicities living in relatively dense clusters to make a few large regions, like compatriots [who are] Mường living in the Northern Salient's southwest and in the Central Salient's north; the Thái living in the Northern Salient's northwest; the Ra Đê living in the Central Salient's northwest plateau.

Note here two features regarding Trường Chinh's construction of powerful social categories and the boundaries he erected between them. First, who were the "Viet people" (*người Việt*)? Does this category bespeak a nation or an ethnicity? Second, the Secretary articulated a tripartite typology of "ethnicity" within the "nation" of Vietnam: the under-specified "Viet people"; and two types of "ethnic minorities," one small and scattered and another dense and clustered. Unlike the "Viet people," he marked these ostensible "minorities" with one or two modifiers: the old "*đồng bào*," or members of the same sack of eggs, he applied to both;<sup>77</sup> one type earned an additional marker of racial difference (*chủng tộc*).<sup>78</sup> I return to the implications of his slippage and typology in due course.

Perhaps most importantly, this passage harks back to the emerging nation-state form by modifying the earlier definition of nation, subtly redefining it in relation to territory. Having already established nation as a transcendental communal category, Trường Chinh now apportioned Vietnam an equivalent space. Note the recitation of regions: Northern and Central Salients recalled, as well, a Southern one. These regions, also known as Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina, bespeak a spatial frame

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<sup>77</sup> The reference here is two-fold: first, to Hồ Chí Minh's opening line in the Declaration of Independence, "Dear fellow compatriots" (*Hỡi đồng bào cả nước*); second, to the origin myth of prince Lạc Long Quân and princess Âu Cơ whose conjugal union led to the birth of 100 children (*đồng bào*) divided evenly between the father's home in the sea and the mother's in the mountains. Cf., Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 1, 303-305.

<sup>78</sup> Note that the racial marker carried over into local representations regarding certain "races" (*chủng tộc*) and the difficulties of mobilizing them for labor conscription. Cf., Nguyễn Khánh, Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam, Ban chấp hành Khu XX, "Báo cáo công tác vùng mới giải phóng trong hai tháng 10, 11/52," 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306.

laden with colonial past and present. Ironically, Vietnam's national territory had been cartographically demarcated—and was still claimed by—"foreign" non-nationals. That the space remained imaginary is significant: at this time, the DRV controlled very little territory. What he articulated was nothing short of an emergent Vietnamese geobody, a space he linked discursively to community.<sup>79</sup> Yet this equation raises another question: how does the national claim to territory affect the relation between space and ethnicity?

In the next paragraph, he accused the French of "division and trickery," of creating, among other local-colonial spatial configurations, the "Thái country," by which he referred to the Thái Federation. In contrast to this alleged divisiveness, he proposed unifying Vietnam's multiple "ethnicities" through application of Marxist-Leninist principles of "equality, self-determination, and interdependence." To this list of ideals, he added the notion of voluntarism. "The ethnicities of Vietnam," he declared, "majority and minority, *voluntarily unify to form a single nation* to defend this right."<sup>80</sup>

A concealed and revealed paragraph addresses directly the question of ethnicity's relation to national territory by posing the possibility of "autonomy" (*tự trị*). The above analysis draws on the speech's text as reprinted in the multi-volume 2001 edition of collected Party papers, *Văn kiện Đảng*. Yet, in that edition, an ellipsis is all that remains of one paragraph. The redacted paragraph is available in another volume on Party Ethnic Policy (noting, parenthetically, "Stored in Internal Affairs"),

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<sup>79</sup> Thongchai (1994). Although I consider national territory to be dominant among leaders of an emerging Vietnam at this time, there were alternative spatial imaginaries associated with Indochina's colonially-determined territory. Cf., Goscha (1995).

<sup>80</sup> Italics in original: "Dân tộc Việt Nam, đa số và thiểu số, *tự giác và tự nguyện đoàn kết chặt chẽ thành một quốc gia* để bảo vệ quyền đó." The next line reads: "There is no problem with ethnic minorities in Vietnam splitting and breaking away from the country of the DRV." Although disingenuous in retrospect, what did the line mean then? "Hoàn thành..." *Văn Kiện Đảng* vol 12, yr 1951 (2001), 140.

its cover stamped “secret.”<sup>81</sup> “We decide,” declared Trường Chinh in the missing and found paragraph, “to recognize a right to local autonomy for those ethnic minorities living in relatively dense clusters in certain established regions.” In other words, he referred to the above typology and allowed only Mường, Thái, and Ra Đê peoples the right to self-rule; evidently, those living in allegedly “haphazard” (*linh tinh*) settlements did not meet his criteria. He added important caveats. Within the densely clustering type, according to its given “level,” an ethnicity may be entitled to “all forms” of autonomy (“political”) or only its “administrative” variant. Unlike the colonial practice, he argued, autonomy does not amount to having one’s own “country.” Amending earlier ICP statements denouncing “divide and rule” and rejecting “autonomous separation,” he proposed autonomy within the Vietnamese nation subject to DRV state regulation.<sup>82</sup> Yet, for fear of these areas falling prey to “imperialist invaders,” he insisted on delaying any immediate implementation. This is power at work in two distinct registers: at the time, Trường Chinh simultaneously offered and denied limited territorial rights to certain ethnically-defined peoples; much later, his Party successors chose to restrict their textual reproduction.

More broadly, the typology of “ethnicities” signals new categories in the making and points to power-laden relations between communities conceived and regulated as such. In stark contrast to its stated egalitarian ideals, the emerging policy betrayed a remarkably unequal agenda: the Secretary conflated description and prescription, i.e. how “ethnicities” of various types did (supposedly) and should (normatively) relate to one another. To recap: his speech defined *dân tộc* as subsidiary

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<sup>81</sup> Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam, *Văn kiện của Đảng về Chính Sách dân tộc* (Hanoi: NXB Sự thật, 1965), 36. On secrets and official practices of concealment, cf., Philip Abrams, “Notes on the difficulty of studying the state,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* vol. 1 no. 1 (1988), 77; Anne Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>82</sup> Cf., “Trích Nghị quyết Hội nghị Trung ương Lần thứ VIII của Đảng Cộng sản Đông-dương,” 10-19 May 1941; “Trích nghị quyết Hội nghị cán bộ Trung ương,” 3-6 Apr 1947 in Đảng (1965), 21-27.

to the community of, and subsumable within the territory of, *quốc gia*; next, the Secretary projected nationally-bounded population counts to sort ethnic types according to group membership. Thus indexed to ethnicity, he then implied that smaller “ethnic” groupings could be summed together, aggregating towards a consolidated category of “ethnic minorities.” In other words, the sublimation of ethnicity (in relation to the nation idea) and its recombination as a subsidiary plurality (according to national population) amounted to a double-displacement. This is marginalization at work. The category “ethnic minorities” obscures the power exercised in its ideological construction: my discursive analysis illustrates the work required to make it. To reproduce this category analytically risks contributing towards the legitimization of multiple—and powerful—disciplinary acts.<sup>83</sup> Nonetheless, “ethnic minorities” was on its way towards becoming a highly regulated, if still unstable, political category.<sup>84</sup>

Not only did the speech articulate a category of “ethnic minorities,” the Party Secretary also contributed towards making a nationally-determined, ethnically-defined majority. Dialectically reconstituted as a singularity, this one population outnumbered all other ethnically-identified, nationally-enumerated populations.<sup>85</sup> In addition to numerical dominance, Trường Chinh endowed this group with cultural and economic superiority and ordered them to wield it among a panoply of inferior others. He obliged the majority, “to help ethnic minorities build their economies and cultures in order to catch up with the ethnic majority.” The language echoes an early 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>83</sup> Cf., Philip Taylor, “Minorities at Large: New Approaches to Minority Ethnicity in Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* vol. 3, no. 3 (2008), 3-43.

<sup>84</sup> The ICP had articulated an early iteration of “ethnic minorities” yet defined the category in relation to Indochina’s broader population and territory. “Trích Nghị quyết của Đại hội lần thứ nhất của Đảng Cộng sản Đông-dương,” in Đảng (1965), 8-15.

<sup>85</sup> “It is easy to forget,” writes Benedict Anderson, “that minorities came into existence in tandem with majorities—and, in Southeast Asia, very recently.” *The Spectre of Comparisons* (New York: Verso, 1998), 318. Cf., Dru C. Gladney, ed., *Making Majorities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); André Burguière and Raymond Grew, eds., *The Construction of Minorities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

civilizing mission: one “ethnicity” now became standard bearer for *national* civilizational norms, privileging one bundle of cultural habits with the same normative status earlier accorded to French civilization. So who was this one group, this allegedly singular majority? Recall that the opening line referred, ambiguously, to “Viet people.” Notwithstanding the powers Trường Chinh now accorded them, he called at last for destroying “colonially-generated discrimination” between “ethnic minorities” and—this time specifically, yet bracketed in quotes—“Kinh people.”

Except for the opening and closing lines, the textual absence of an ethnonym in reference to a “majority” signifies and contributes to the powerful naturalization of Kinh/Việt cultural norms. Trường Chinh himself hailed from the Red River delta province of Nam Định. At times during this speech before the assembled Party delegates, he spoke in the third-person inclusive “we” (or, *chúng ta*).<sup>86</sup> Notwithstanding the presence of Lao and Khmer representatives, this dual slippage—between Viet and Kinh and majority; between the speaker, audience, and self/group identifications—conceals a series of telling conflation. In this instance, “we” collapses distinctions between state, nation, Party, and a dominant ethnicity, revealing an emergent collectivity empowering themselves to act as state in the name of nation among ethnicized others.<sup>87</sup>

So far, this analysis of nation and ethnicity in Vietnamese has highlighted a discursive form of power to delineate uncertain social boundaries and to reconstruct them as ranked communal categories always in relation to evolving statist prerogatives. To regulate and discipline forms of community, however, was not the

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<sup>86</sup> For example: “Desiring to implement this ethnic policy above,” Trường Chinh stated, “we must implement the following points.”

<sup>87</sup> This statist third person plural, or state-we, pervades official documents produced for institutional consumption.



only source of DRV power: the rising state also commanded a military force with which to expand its claim to national territory. Elevated to an ideology, as in a “national liberation struggle,” nation departed from ethnicity as a means to justify coercion organized by and for state. By identifying nation with territory, nationalism serves to legitimate a state claim to monopolize the means of organized violence and pursue the ends of territory.<sup>88</sup> Historically, the People’s Army’s rapid advances in the early 1950s transformed the relationship between the DRV state’s territorial expanse and the Vietnamese nation’s imagined boundaries.

Subsequent versions of what Trường Chinh first articulated as “ethnic policy” (*chính sách dân tộc*) continued to evolve in relation to military advances and, in turn, expanding DRV territory. From 1951 through the end of the first Indochina War, what was first promulgated as Party Ethnic Policy and, later, as DRV Ethnic Policy, followed the basic principles Trường Chinh had outlined: on the one hand, open adherence to equality, interdependence, and self-determination; on the other, muted marginalization of “ethnic minorities” and privileging of an “ethnic majority.” Yet the prospect and achievement of militarized state territorial expansion drove debates on a key point: over how and when to recognize “local autonomy.” Notwithstanding the Secretary’s efforts to solve it, the “ethnicity question” remained unresolved.

In August 1952, the Workers’ Party approved two decisions—neither of which mentions autonomy—in preparation for a military offensive scheduled for later that autumn. First, the Politburo approved the “Party’s Ethnic Minority Policy” and, second, the Party Secretary’s Council approved an order guiding its implementation in the imagined space—and still to be secured place—of the Northwest Zone.<sup>89</sup> The

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<sup>88</sup> This analysis draws both on Weber’s definition of the state in his “Politics as a Vocation” (1946: 77-128) as well as the critical re-reading of this definition in Corrigan and Sayer (1985: 7).

<sup>89</sup> “Chính sách...” August 1952, *Văn Kiện Đảng*, vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 259-282; “Chỉ thị...” 16 Aug 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* Vol. 13 year 1952 (2001), 241-258; “Thông tri của Ban Bí thư hướng dẫn thực

Northwest Committee's marching orders began with a preamble that constituted its bailiwick as a "very complex and backwards area." In addition to demeaning local capacity, the order privileged Kinh-ness by reserving leadership positions for "downstream cadres" in local government, such as Vice Chair or representative on any given Committee, in order to "help" local cadres and ensure the masses follow the proper line.<sup>90</sup> They were also instructed to implement "unity" between "compatriot ethnic minorities" and "Kinh" in opposition to the French "colonials." Like the propaganda curriculum's emphasis on distinguishing between friend and foe, an alleged foreign-ness became a basis for national recognition. Behind this national "unity," however, lurked the basis for two social cleavages to reappear within the evolving state's local institutions: Committees reserved a privileged role for Kinh cadres and incorporated locally-produced, highly unequal social hierarchies.

The dramatic expansion of territory under DRV control in late 1952 emboldened President Hồ Chí Minh to broach, once again, the idea of autonomy. In January 1953, in his opening speech to the Workers' Party's 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum, he proposed that it was now "time" to resolve the "ethnic question." In contrast to "false autonomy" under French Empire and the Associated State of Vietnam, he offered "true autonomy" within the DRV as a mode of spatial inclusion to "unify all ethnicities."<sup>91</sup> The Party's Executive Committee accepted his proposal yet still stipulated a number of conditions before establishing, what they called, "zones of ethnic minority autonomy."<sup>92</sup>

Six months later, in June 1953, the DRV government issued a formal "Ethnic

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hiện Nghị quyết của Bộ Chính trị về chính sách dân tộc thiểu số," 23 Aug 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 257-258.

<sup>90</sup> "Chỉ thị..." 16 Aug 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol. 13, yr 1952 (2001), 248.

<sup>91</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, "Báo cáo trước Hội nghị lần thứ tư an chấp hành Trung ương Đảng," 25 Jan 1953, *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập* vol 7, yrs 1953-1955 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 1996), 18.

<sup>92</sup> "Báo cáo tại Hội nghị Ban chấp hành Trung ương lần thứ tư về công tác mặt trận," *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 117.

Policy” which summarized and proclaimed official thinking regarding relations between communities conceived as nation and ethnicity.<sup>93</sup> Its preamble reads, “All ethnic majority and minorities [who have] long lived together in the homeland (*đất nước*) of Vietnam have come together to build the nation (*quốc gia*) of Vietnam.” According to this document signed by Vice Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng, then, territory and nation become one in “Vietnam.” “Ethnic Policy” stated that inter-ethnic unity be predicated on egalitarian principles and “mutual assistance” oriented towards a two-fold goal: in order to advance “nation-state-making” (*kiến quốc*); and to achieve the “establishment of ethnic autonomy (to be defined later).” In other words, if the policy recapitulated nation and ethnicity as hierarchically organized communal forms, then it also preserved for policy-makers the power to regulate fundamental ambiguities. On behalf of the DRV, Phạm Văn Đồng embraced “ethnic” autonomy yet decided to delay any implementation. Moreover, the formula of “nation-state-making” subtly equated nation (*nước* or *quốc gia*) and state (*nhà nước* or *quốc gia*) based on a common project: to construct exclusive territorial sovereignty. Vietnam was on the march *and* it was a project in the making.

All of the policies discussed above were issued by Party and Central Government elites. They were prescriptive in nature, designed to regulate from afar relations of power expressed regionally. How they came to be implemented depended on their enactment by officials on the ground. Localizing central policy meant negotiation among diverse peoples in historically mutable conditions. This negotiation fed back into renewed attempts to refine Party and Central Government policies, especially regarding the national space afforded “ethnic minorities” and the role state-led social transformation would play among them.

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<sup>93</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Ban ‘Chính Sách dân tộc’ số 281-TTg: Chính sách dân tộc hiện nay của Chính phủ nước Việt Nam Dân Chủ Cộng hoà,” 22 June 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1332.

### *Remaking relations of rule in place*

On the night of 7 October 1952, the People's Army and supporting laborers (*dân công*) crossed the Red River to commence a Northwest Military Campaign.<sup>94</sup> The 30,000 combatants and laborers were guided by instructions from the Party's Central Executive Committee to wipe out the enemy's vitality (*sinh lực*), win over the people, and "liberate" territory.<sup>95</sup> The emphasis on securing territory marked a new phase in state formation: unlike the first Northwest Campaign of early 1950 when military tactics de-emphasized territorial control, this second campaign emphasized holding territory now considered by Party leaders to be "strategic and important."<sup>96</sup>

Coercive techniques changed accordingly, shifting from guerilla assassinations and selective terror to combat among regular troops.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, many of the Northwest's residents first encountered the DRV in the guise of its armed forces and, as such, the question of the People's Army's relations with local inhabitants assumed profound importance. In anticipation of this militarized encounter, President Hồ Chí Minh had issued on 9 September 1952 the "Eight Government Orders" on exemplary military conduct.<sup>98</sup> Just as the military was creatively interpreting Chairman Mao's stages of revolutionary warfare and applying it to a new context, President Hồ's eight orders did the same for military conduct, guiding how soldiers and officers should

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<sup>94</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp, *The Road to Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 2004a), 392.

<sup>95</sup> "Chỉ thị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương về mở chiến dịch Quang Trung," 28 Sept 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 304-306.

<sup>96</sup> Cf., Trường Chinh, "Chỉ thị của ban thường vụ trung ương về mở chiến dịch Tây Bắc và chuẩn bị chiến trường Đông Bắc," 6 Jan 1950, *Văn Kiện Đảng* vol 11, yr 1950 (2001), 7-9.

<sup>97</sup> Although DRV political and military leaders placed emphasis on mobile warfare, they maintained guerilla tactics in areas of "enemy occupation." "Nghị quyết án về việc phát triển du kích chiến tranh tại Tây Bắc," June 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 502-527.

<sup>98</sup> The eight orders are: defend the people's character and property; defend the people's livelihoods; confiscate property of the French and traitors; defend places of worship; praise achievements and punish crimes; preserve social order and security; assist locals with matters of urgency (lit., "reorganize the people"); defend foreign nationals' character and property. "Tám điều mệnh lệnh của Chính phủ Dân chủ Cộng hoà Việt Nam," *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, vol 6, yrs 1950-1953 (1995), 564-567.

behave in relation to the “masses.”<sup>99</sup> Through the exercise of exemplary restraint, behavior, and service, Hồ’s eight orders aimed to provide a concrete means with which the People’s Army could differentiate themselves from French-allied forces.

From early October through December 1952, the People’s Army “liberated” much of the Northwest Zone. The military enlarged its territorial control from the Việt Bắc base area westward to capture both banks of the Red River crossing through Yên Bái and Lào Cai; southward to include much of Sơn La; westward to the Lao border at Điện Biên Phủ; and, finally, northward to the outskirts of Lai Châu town. They also controlled the two main roads leading from the lowlands up and into the montane frontier: Road 41 from Hoà Bình, Mộc Châu, Sơn La, and west to Điện Biên Phủ; and Road 13 from Yên Bái into Nghĩa Lộ.<sup>100</sup> Though still protected by 5-7 battalions, including one Thái battalion (9<sup>ème</sup> BAT), the spatial extent of the Thái Federation was reduced to a corner of its former domain: from the town of Lai Châu stretching northwest to Mường Tè in triangular frontier territory formed by the Chinese/Lao/Viet-Tonkin borders.<sup>101</sup> In addition, 11 battalions of French-allied forces regrouped and formed a fortified base at Nà Sản where they could be supported by French airlifts. In spite of repeated People’s Army assaults, they held out for months until evacuated by air in August, 1953.

The advance of the People’s Army during the (second) Northwest campaign recast territorial control in new, yet not uncontested, terms. “After liberation, a new life began,” reads a typical account, “and the Party, Government, and President Ho

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<sup>99</sup> For more on the conduct of Mao’s People’s Army during war against the Kuomintang (KMT; aka, Guomindang, GMD) and the Japanese, see J.A.G. Roberts, *A Concise History of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 235.

<sup>100</sup> Road 13, also known as Trans-Indochinese National Road 13, was built after World War I to link the colonial territories of Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia. Cf., Goscha, (1995).

<sup>101</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, Đảng LĐVN, Ban Chấp hành Khu Tây Bắc “Báo cáo 3 tháng đầu năm 1953,” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 1.

Chi Minh perceived clearly the many difficulties of the Northwest's ethnic compatriots..." and set about solving them.<sup>102</sup> As with so many official histories written well after the event in question, this kind of remark is best read as reproducing a dialectical, two-fold claim. The key word "liberation" both marks a point of rupture and makes an assertion about regime legitimacy. If to liberate (*giải phóng*) means to free an area from enemy occupation or foreign control, then in a *prima facie* sense, the People's Army accomplished this dramatically.<sup>103</sup> Alternatively, to accept the terms of "liberation" implies accepting, also, that the displaced regime was foreign and belonged to the enemy—in short, illegitimate. Yet not all residents believed that the Thái Federation was their enemy, nor did they accept the French as ultimately responsible for their alleged un-freedom. In fact, French partisans also used the word "*liberation*" to describe the Expeditionary Forces' territorial gains on behalf of the Thái Federation.<sup>104</sup> Liberation, then, is best understood as a rising regime's claim to its own legitimacy, one linked dialectically to a rival's illegitimacy. Subsequent histories, such as the above, echo this claim. Quotation marks bracketing "to liberate" point to the term's euphemistic intent (for comparison, substitute "to conquer") and signal its underlying import—i.e., to legitimate territory claimed by an evolving state ostensibly on behalf of an emergent nation.

Political elites legitimated warfare on the principle of national liberation and once an area was "liberated," officials moved in and worked openly to (re)assume a project of state-making. "Liberation" became also an official spatial referent to demarcate administrative units and organize everyday activities of governing, making

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<sup>102</sup> Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên, *Lịch Sử Đảng Bộ Huyện Điện Biên* (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2005), 94.

<sup>103</sup> Translated from Vietnamese into English as "to liberate, free, emancipate." Đặng Chấn Liêu et al (2001), 288. I translate *giải phóng* from another Vietnamese-language dictionary as, "to abolish oppressive exploitation; to bring out of conditions of slavery, occupation." Phan Văn Các (2003), 171.

<sup>104</sup> Cf., Jean Jerusalem, *Monographie sur le Pays Thái* (1953, Typescript), 55-58.

war, production, and exchange. Within newly acquired territory, the rising DRV subdivided the Zone's terrain into a tripartite spatial matrix to guide, simultaneously, the construction of institutions and the transformation of society.<sup>105</sup> "Free zones" (*vùng tự do*) included areas with established "resistance" bases and institutions, such as eastern Lào Cai and Yên Bái, and were first to experiment with agrarian programs. Much of the Northwest Zone, including most of Sơn La Province, eastern and southern parts of Lai Châu Province, and Điện Biên Phủ District, fell into the category of "recently liberated zones" (*vùng mới giải phóng*), requiring the (re)construction of government infrastructure. Meanwhile, cadres in "temporarily occupied areas" (*vùng tạm bị chiếm*)—i.e., what remained of the Federation in the northern part of Lai Châu—focused on propaganda and guerilla warfare. The distinction between recently liberated and occupied zones was also known in military parlance as "rear" and "front," a distinction used both to organize provisioning, labor recruitment, and exchange relations and to signal future iterations of militarized state territorial advance. I return to these topics in the next chapters.

The military campaign's sweep through the Black River region prepared the ground for the Workers' Party and the DRV to assert themselves in territory they claimed and administered together as "Northwest Vietnam." As soon as the military entered Sơn La, supporters posted a bulletin to signal the regime change. Dated 16 October 1952 and signed by Sa Văn Minh, Chair of the DRV's Sơn La Province Resistance and Administrative Committee, the bulletin announced to the public a new form of rule and its dispatching of the old.<sup>106</sup> Notably, not once does the bulletin mention the Thái Federation and its local leadership but, instead, casts aspersions at an

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<sup>105</sup> Cf., Đảng LĐVN, Ban Chấp hành Khu Tây Bắc, "Báo cáo tình hình Tây Bắc và nhiệm vụ năm 1953," 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 15-16.

<sup>106</sup> "Sa," aka "Xa." Sa Văn Minh, Chủ tịch UBND tỉnh Sơn La, "Thông cáo về việc hủy bỏ các thể lệ cấm đoán tàn ác của giặc Tây," 16 Oct 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306.

undifferentiated foreign enemy. Indeed, the “Bulletin re cancellation of cruel prohibitions of the Western Bandits” blames only these vaguely conceived “Westerners” for Sơn La’s suffering. Moreover, the bulletin credits President Hồ, the province’s Administrative Committee, and the People’s Army for enabling Sơn La’s “compatriots” (*đồng bào*) to be “forever free and happy” (*tự do và sung sướng mãi mãi*). Now these compatriots could enjoy “rights to the following freedoms”:

- 1) Return to old villages and no longer live in concentrated settlements;
- 2) Ownership of rice by the grower and no longer has to be concentrated;
- 3) Abolition of payments in rice, meat, wine, women, etc. to military posts;
- 4) Freedom to enter the forest to open swiddens, to fish at night;
- 5) Freedom of movement, assembly, worship.

Certainly, as later reports and secondary sources document, the restrictions from which this Bulletin “freed” them had been burdensome on the local population.<sup>107</sup> But, with one important exception—releasing women from obligations to entertain officials and soldiers—these stated freedoms largely amounted to a restoration of “rights” according to peacetime norms.

The bulletin’s explanatory intent both revealed and concealed important lessons for the target audience. Should the “compatriots” have questions regarding “any difficulties,” they were instructed to ask their village head or to consult the relevant Commune Committee. Evidently, village leadership was no longer prohibited from DRV administration: the title of mountain village head (*trưởng bản*) now replaced the colonial variant (*tạo bản*) but, as discussed below, the person in charge often remained the same.<sup>108</sup> The bulletin is notable for its discursive flourish: by positioning the DRV state and its military not only as guarantors of “freedom” but

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<sup>107</sup> Cf., Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược về tình hình công việc chính quyền trong hai tháng 10 và 11—1952 tại vùng mới được giải phóng ở Tây Bắc,” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456.; Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên (2005), 137-141.

<sup>108</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec. 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4.



also, by neglecting to mention the Thái Federation, it positioned DRV local government as the only stated alternative to “oppressive” foreign rule. Absent from the list of new “freedoms” was the right to one’s labor power while the alleged “ownership” of rice by the grower did not last long. In short order, the DRV would institute renewed claims on labor (as *dân công* porters) and produce (as military provisions).

If public bulletins trumpeted the ostensible liberator’s virtues, the first internal reports from this time read as descriptions of a newly discovered land and peoples. A report dated 22 December by the Prime Minister’s delegate, Phan Mỹ, exemplifies a crucial discursive shift in comparison with reports dating to the earlier period of guerilla warfare.<sup>109</sup> Unlike earlier state reports, his does not boast of sabotaging the enemy or count, for example, roadways destroyed or granaries burned. Rather, the delegate writes in a tone of assumed responsibility by describing, in contrast, how military engineers now built bridges and soldiers assisted farmers in harvest work.<sup>110</sup> Phan Mỹ acquainted central leaders with a place over which, only a few months earlier, they could express only an aspirational claim to sovereignty. The delegate informed the Central Government of its new territory, why they must care for the population, and how to rebuild damaged infrastructure. Among others, it was Phan Mỹ’s job to make this new terrain and its population legible, to render an imaginary space into concrete place governable from afar.<sup>111</sup> The DRV had, it seems, matured quickly from a position of resistance to one of partial domination.

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<sup>109</sup> Available in two separate archival files, indicating significance and readership. Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec. 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456; *Ibid.* file no. 1306.

<sup>110</sup> A nationalist history of Điện Biên Phủ echoes this discursive shift, even if the authors (mistakenly but revealingly) credit an already given Party-state with a quick resolution of social problems: “After the liberation of the Northwest, the Party and Government immediately worried about the work of famine relief and poverty alleviation by supplying farm implements, cloth, salt, etc...” Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm, *Điện Biên trong Lịch sử* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1979), 150.

<sup>111</sup> James Scott, *Seeing like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

If the DRV now claimed much of the Northwest Zone's area—estimated at three quarters its total or 28,500 square kilometers—Phan Mỹ described land in terms of its strategic and economic value and the population in terms of its territorial administration.<sup>112</sup> The Việt Bắc base area now connected overland with Laos: he measured the distance at 270 km, “as a bird flies,” from eastern Mộc Châu west to Điện Biên Phủ's “border” (*biên giới*). If the value of Điện Biên Phủ was self-evident to his audience, recall that the DRV now controlled a route all the way to a strategic pass (Tây trang) affording passage to and from northern Laos. He also recognized this particular border—not Indochina's—as an edge of the DRV's sovereign territorial claim. In so doing, he demarcated internal and external state spaces.

Phan Mỹ allocated the Northwest Zone's internalized terrain according to the prior delineation of 4 provinces (*tỉnh*) and subdivided their populations among 12 districts (*huyện*). Many of these districts, particularly in Sơn La, had been site of revolutionary organizing in 1948-50 (see table 4.1).

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<sup>112</sup> Area from Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg, file no. 1306, p. 1.

Table 4.1: Administrative divisions and estimated populations of the Northwest Zone, December 1952.<sup>113</sup>

Province ( <i>tỉnh</i> )	District ( <i>huyện</i> )	Estimated Population
Yên Bái	1. Văn Chấn (Nghĩa Lộ)	30,000
	2. Than Uyên	20,000
Sơn La	3. Phù Yên	30,000
	4. Mộc Châu	12,000
	5. Yên Châu	12,000
	6. Mai Sơn	20,000
	7. Mường La	20,000
	8. Thuận Châu	30,000
Lai Châu	9. Quỳnh Nhai	“unclear”
	10. Tuần Giáo	“unclear”
	11. Điện Biên Phủ	“unclear”
Lào Cai	12. Phong Thổ	“unclear”
Total estimated population:		300,000

Note that although administrative units bear the label of “*huyện*,” i.e. Vietnamese-language names associated with delta regions, these units by and large reproduced the historic *muang* form, also known as the “*châu*” of the Thái Federation. Indeed, Thái leaders were poised to reproduce the *muang* form not only in DRV administrative guise but also through reasserting their locally enmeshed rule and control of agrarian relations of production.

Phan Mỹ endeavored to communicate the territory’s value according to the locally dominant Thái language. The “recently liberated territory” included the Northwest Zone’s four largest “rice baskets,” known to local Thái speakers, as “*nhất Thanh, nhì Lô, tam Tac, tư Than*”; or, respectively, Mường Thanh (Điện Biên Phủ), Nghĩa Lộ, Phù Yên, and Than Uyên. All of these wet-rice areas he recorded in terms of area, implicitly noting their agricultural potential.<sup>114</sup> Indeed, “liberating” these

<sup>113</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 1.

<sup>114</sup> Dimensions recorded as follows: Mường Thanh (20km x 9km), Nghĩa Lộ (15km x 5km), Phù Yên (10km x 1-4km), and Than Uyên (unclear). “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 1

areas occurred at a conspicuous time—“when,” he noted, “rice harvest was happening or about to happen”—enabling the self-proclaimed liberators to claim not only land but also what crops farmers grew on it.

“Aside from rice” the delegate described a bounty of “local forest products” (*lâm thổ sản*). His list included: opium “in Hmong areas”; deer antlers and bear bones in Yên Châu and Mộc Châu; cloth, dye, and cotton in Yên Châu and Mai Sơn; cardamom in Sơn La; and cinnamon in Yên Bái. Production of these same “forest products” extended into Laos. He described lively riverine commerce: traders plied the Black River on some 700 boats, exchanged for these products, and landed downstream to resell them in Hoà Bình’s Phương Lâm market. In spite of their association with “forests,” note that many of these items originated in agroforestry gardens (cinnamon, cardamom), swidden plots (opium), or fields (cotton) cultivated by farmers. He stated, revealingly, that all these products had yet to be “statistically counted” (*thống kê*), indicating an interest in taking stock of goods for future state regulation of production and exchange.<sup>115</sup>

Out of the region’s estimated total of 300,000, the population in recently liberated zones included approximately 250,000 people. He described this population ethnically and located them according to settlement elevation: a “majority” Thái and the “Thái-ized” Mường lived in the valleys; the “Mán” (Dao) worked swiddens on mountain slopes; and at “even higher” elevations lived the “Mèo” (Hmong). Of the newly claimed territory, only Văn Chấn (or, Nghĩa Lộ, now in Yên Bái province), he regretted, had statistics enumerating its population ethnically: “10,000 Thái; 2,000 Mường; 6,000 Mèo [Hmong]; 5,000 Mán [Dao]; 7,000 Thổ [Tàì]; 1,000 Kinh; 300 Hoà Kiều [overseas Chinese].”<sup>116</sup> Like data cited above on the territory’s strategic and

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<sup>115</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 1-2.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

economic values, these demographic data were not neutral. Stated as social fact, such data were a complex outcome of dialectical processes of self-description and state ascription. If ascription dated back to the colonial era or earlier, then the DRV's emerging preoccupation with knowing and classifying the "national" population in terms of "ethnicity" renewed a political project with a slightly different goal: making a national frontier.

Governing this population, however, proved to be a daunting task beset by unforeseen difficulties. DRV and Party reports describe how French and Thái Federation rule had rendered the population sickly, abused, divided along ethnic lines, and profoundly displaced. Sexually transmitted disease and smallpox were endemic but had yet to be treated in any systematic fashion. In Điện Biên Phủ smallpox "routinely" led to the death of 500-600 people.<sup>117</sup> Gambling, theft, and drunkenness were common.<sup>118</sup> In addition to heavy taxation, the Thái Federation forced provisioning of military posts (*nộp bớt*), impressed corvée labor (*bắt phu*), and bonded peasant laborers (*cuông nguốt*) to hereditary local rulers. In Sơn La, for example, a Lord (*Phìa*) was entitled to 4 *mẫu* of wet-rice land, 20 bonded families, and 2 corvée laborers; a Vice-Lord (*phó phìa*) to 2 *mẫu* of land, 12 families, and 1 laborer.<sup>119</sup> The Federation abused women as "dancers": Phan Mỹ reported the discovery of circulars presented in each commune calling on all ladies ("*cô gái*") to study dance (*xoè*) in order to serve and attend to ("*hầu*") Federation and French soldiers at parties.<sup>120</sup> Rape

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<sup>117</sup> What the author meant by "routine" or "regular" is unclear: the original report reads, "tại Điện Biên Phủ thường xuyên 5,6 trăm người chết về bệnh đậu..." Perhaps "routine" meant that large numbers of disease-related deaths were common during the period prior to DRV control. Italics added. Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4-5; Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 5.

<sup>119</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 4.

<sup>120</sup> Note that *cô gái* (lady or girl) and *hầu* (to attend subserviently) appear in quotation marks. Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3.

and sexual abuse perpetrated by these soldiers against local women appears to have been both routine (in a manner akin to provisioning, villages close to military posts had to “submit” (*nộp*) their women weekly); and a calculated means of exacting punishment or spreading terror (mass rape in Dêu village, Nghĩa Lộ was carefully planned and chillingly executed).<sup>121</sup>

Reports charged the “colonial gang” with a “policy of ethnic division” to provoke tensions between groups defined ethnically. Thái Federation military commanders deployed a given battalion outside their area of recruitment: for example, a battalion recruited from Sơn La’s Black Thái population operated in Lai Châu’s White Thái areas, and vice versa. The Federation facilitated land grabs by employing Thái peoples to banish Hmong residents from their villages, encouraging the former to encroach on the vacated land. They forbade the use and study of the “Kinh language.” Presumably, restricting the use of an emerging “national language” was an attempt to forestall revolutionary organizing predicated on learning Romanized Vietnamese.<sup>122</sup>

The Federation’s practice of “concentrating settlements” meant that, in some cases, entire villages suspected of revolutionary sympathies were moved forcibly from mountain redoubts to lowland camps. Clearing the mountains of its population served two purposes. The Federation could more easily capture subjects for *corvée* labor. Second, the Expeditionary Corps could regain control of areas long targeted by armed propaganda teams. Hmong groups suffered gravely from forced resettlement, with horrifying results. Not only did their montane swidden fields lie fallow, but they did

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<sup>121</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3; Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 4. On women in the French armed forces, cf., Bernard Fall, *Street Without Joy* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole, 1961), 131-143. Although Fall is silent on Thái partisans and dismisses charges of rape against French soldiers (135-136), he documents the French military’s patronage, and official incorporation, of a *Bordel Mobile de Campagne* (Mobile Field Brothel). He claims these women were “volunteers” (133) and evokes a sense of colonial nostalgia, complete with a deeply gendered perspective on normative roles of and relations between men and women in wartime.

<sup>122</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3; Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 2-3.

not adjust to cramped quarters and hot climate of valley areas. In the village of Pu-ten, Mai Son district, 450 of 500 resettled people died. Among the Hmong of Tu-lêj, of 200 families forced downhill, 160 perished.<sup>123</sup> Subsequent DRV administrators documented additional cases of forced resettlement and mass starvation.<sup>124</sup>

Certainly, some of these accusations may amount to misinformation, something the French and Federation engaged in as well regarding the “Viet Minh.” Although the language of “debauchery” (*truy lạc*) and “exploitation” (*bóc lột*) rehearses an anti-colonial trope of a society debased by its colonial rulers, the documented practices of Thái Federation rule (abuse of women, bonded labor, forced provisioning, etc.) are corroborated in histories of French colonial rule in this region (see Chapter 2). Moreover, it would be a mistake to dismiss how Federation rule and DRV efforts to destabilize it together contributed to heightened levels of violence and broad social displacement. Indeed, the (in)voluntary flight of people out of the Federation can be interpreted as popular confirmation of brutal conditions there. Prior to the Northwest Campaign of late 1952, “many people” from Văn Chấn, Sơn La, and Lai Châu had either fled to “liberated zones” in the Việt Bắc or crossed the border into Laos.<sup>125</sup> Jean Jerusalem confirms large scale displacement within the Federation itself: in 1952, he estimated that “refugee” populations had swelled to 1,500 in Phong Thổ, 3,000 in Than Uyên, and upwards of 4-5,000 in Sơn La.<sup>126</sup>

Understandably, years of warfare and shrill accusations—from all quarters—had led the population to greet “liberation” with a healthy dose of skepticism. Notwithstanding bulletins posted in regional centers, like that in Sơn La, many people

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<sup>123</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 2; Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 3.

<sup>124</sup> Quang Văn Đức, “Kiểm điểm thực hiện chính sách dân tộc thiểu số qua công tác chống đói,” July 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2756, p. 1-2.

<sup>125</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 5.

<sup>126</sup> Jerusalem (1953), 23.

had no communication with the new regime nor were some even aware of its recent military victory. A Hmong village in Nghĩa Lộ, even one month after their “liberation,” still believed the “West” was in power and, much to a DRV official’s dismay, provided assistance to a defeated army remnant (*tàn binh*).<sup>127</sup> Cadres and soldiers reported frequent “misunderstandings” about their intent. They worried that peasants still did not properly distinguish the “Government’s borrowing” from the “post payment” made to the French, i.e. between what they considered to be legitimate and illegitimate military provisioning.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, distinguishing (*phân biệt*) between the two regimes was not enough: officials continued to express grave concern about a lack of popular “hatred” (*căm thù*) for the old regime.<sup>129</sup>

Cadres and soldiers, therefore, renewed a commitment to legitimation work and engaged local people through education and propaganda. The military earned praise for adhering to President Hồ’s Eight Orders by rebuilding war-damaged homes, leaving vegetable gardens intact, and assisting farmers with harvest activities.<sup>130</sup> Then cadres picked up when and where the soldiers left off: “assuring” the people who had fled the fighting, explaining the Eight Orders, and announcing the abolishment of Federation regulations.<sup>131</sup> Professional propagandists accompanied the military and brought specialized knowledge on how to “agitate the masses.” Arriving in a given location secured by the People’s Army, propaganda educators split up and visited each village in order to school residents in comparisons between old and new regimes. They announced the abrogation of “oppressive and exploitative” rules enforced by the “colonialists.” In addition to the Eight Orders, cadres explained DRV policies such as,

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<sup>127</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4.

<sup>128</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.* p.14; ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 4.

<sup>130</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3-4.

<sup>131</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 5-6, 14.



leniency for former Thái Federation combatants and officials, circulation of a new currency and modes of exchange, and on the people's rights—and duties—as citizens. In sum, the propaganda curriculum emphasized that the people's capacity for "liberation," their ability to be "free," was due to DRV military intervention.<sup>132</sup>

Notwithstanding this preliminary legitimization work, the conditions that had troubled early revolutionary activities—extensive area, difficult terrain, and a shortage of cadres—persisted into this next phase of state formation.

To rectify alleged popular misunderstandings about the rising regime's actions and intent, the Northwest Party Committee organized propaganda sessions in each district between December 1952 and January 1953. The agenda was notable both for what they discussed and what they did not. In all districts, according to one report, cadres used these events to explain President Hồ's Eight Orders, to broadcast the "meaning of the victory," and how to use "grievances" to "expose crimes" and direct popular "hatred" towards "bandits" (*giặc*).<sup>133</sup> In other words, legitimization work attempted to impart the determined politics of (national) friend and (foreign) foe. Although the Northwest Zone's Political Commissar reported "implementation" of the Party's Ethnic Policy as of February, public discussions only began on the subject in January and only in the district of Văn Chấn.<sup>134</sup>

Why here and, as of yet, nowhere else? I would argue that Văn Chấn fit two important criteria and figures in a broader pattern. First, this district of Yên Bái was considered a free zone and was located close to the Việt Bắc base area. Perhaps cadres

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<sup>132</sup> Phan Mỹ writes, "The people of the Northwest see clearly that they can be liberated, they can be free." "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3-4.

<sup>133</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, Đảng LĐVN, Ban Chấp hành Khu XX, "Báo cáo kiểm điểm chương trình công tác tháng 12/52 và 1/1953 vùng mới giải phóng," Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471.

<sup>134</sup> After District Committees held seminars to direct policy implementation, cadres returned to communes and "studied" with the masses. Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 1.

and their superiors felt more secure introducing an unsettled topic there. Second, state knowledge of Văn Chấn's ethnic profile made it a good test case. More broadly, the use of one site to test policy implementation points to a consistent model and pattern of state learning, applied as well with respect to emergent agricultural taxation and labor recruitment.

Over two months in recently liberated areas of Sơn La, the Northwest Committee organized six “ethnic conference festivities” (*hội nghị liên hoan dân tộc*)—in which, ironically, cadres did not broach the Ethnic Policy—attended by over 1000 representatives. One representative stated, “before conferences like this, only nobles (*Phìa*) and higher [social ranks] were allowed to participate; now even the people can also participate.” He described in his own words a new style of mass politics in contrast to colonially recognized feudal norms. Assembled audiences were shown films such as *Vietnam Resistance* produced by a Chinese cinematographic team in 1952 from footage shot in the Red River Delta. For many, it was a first exposure to moving pictures, signaling a sea change in revolutionary propaganda from the 1940s when cadres could rely only on spoken word and print.<sup>135</sup> In spite of changes in audience and medium, there was continuity in content: representatives were instructed in the “solicitous care of the cadres” (*sự săn sóc ân cần của cán bộ*) towards the people. Results were, according to the region's Political Commissar, “good.” By the conclusion of these conferences, he continued, the representatives “understood clearly the meaning of resistance, trusted in President Hồ and the Government, and hated the enemy.” After returning to their villages, he described how these representatives “enthusiastically” reported back to their communities.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> For more on mass communication, cf., Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), 77-82. On the film “Vietnam Resistance” (*Việt Nam kháng chiến*), cf., David Marr, “A Passion for Modernity: Intellectuals and the Media,” in Hy V. Luong, ed., *Postwar Vietnam* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 269.

<sup>136</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 1.

These meetings indicate the self-conscious construction of a state idea.<sup>137</sup>

Building on Emile Durkheim's notion of constructing a repertoire of collective representations, Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer highlight the "representational—i.e., performed and visible—features of power." I concur that theatrical performances, such as the above, contributed significantly towards constructing a moral order predicated on an idea of state that could, and would, lead society's improvement on a forward march to progress. However, unlike Corrigan and Sayer's observation of English state formation, Vietnamese cadres at this time did not construct an image of State in a Hobbesian mold as rational, impersonal, and transcendent.<sup>138</sup> Rather, cadres aimed to construct an idea of state as personal, solicitous, and caring—much like an ideal parent behaves towards a child.

Behind these formalized scenes, legitimization work unfolded in more everyday forms as well. Legitimation involved state-mediated relations of exchange that did not always work as intended. For example, by late December, peasants all over "worried" about the scarce supply of salt. This pressing grievance—and the government's inability to solve it—led the Northwest's Political Commissar, Nguyễn Kháng, to fret that Committees and cadres might be perceived as not "truly interested [and] caring for the people's livelihood." In turn, he expressed concern that not providing salt and farmtools might be detrimental to planned state claims on peasant labor, grains, and foodstocks.<sup>139</sup> In subsequent chapters I return in detail to emergent relations of exchange and their political import. What is significant here is an idea of state as caring and interested in popular livelihoods.

Building an idea of state was closely linked to ongoing construction of state

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<sup>137</sup> For more on the "state idea," cf., Abrams (1988).

<sup>138</sup> Corrigan and Sayer (1985), 79, 103-105; Emile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

<sup>139</sup> Nguyễn Kháng, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 13.

institutions. General guidelines described how village chiefs (*Tạo bản*) would be retained temporarily while a “new local government” would be established. Gradually, cadres consulted with residents in order to select village heads (*Trưởng bản*) to replace chiefs. Once village leadership was secured, the work of establishing a Commune Committee (*Ủy ban xã*) began and cadres from the area in question gained priority as representatives. In the interim, until these Commune Committees were fully “authenticated” (*chân chính*), province and district level cadres directly supervised administrative affairs. “In general,” reported Phan Mỹ, “these are the procedures *but the work of implementation is up to the locality*.”<sup>140</sup>

Indeed, the above procedures were an ideal form of making a political transition. In practice, however, it was precisely their local implementation that complicated the work of legitimating and institutionalizing power in state form. Implementation prompted and required negotiation. As such, DRV legitimation work echoed and paralleled the reconstruction of pre-existing ruling relations configured within bureaucratic structures; and encouraged their social recognition as the DRV. Constructing an idea of state, therefore, was a dynamic process that changed and shifted in relation to prior and ongoing configurations of local and extra-local rule in guise of a singular, uniform “state.”

As was the case during the late 1940s, cadres identified problems regarding the size and shape of jurisdictions and the backgrounds of personnel needed to staff them. Once again, officials charged with implementing Central Government plans drew on a familiar trope both to complain about their bailiwick and to explain the difficulties they themselves created there: “The Northwest Zone has *vast land and sparse people*, few cadres, the people’s level is still low, and we still do not clearly understand the

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<sup>140</sup> Italics added. Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4-5.

locality's capacity or its situation..."<sup>141</sup> They blamed local people for problems produced in the making of DRV rule.

If the Northwest Zone's evolving territorial administration reproduced the underlying *muang* as districts, then subdividing the districts into communes (*xã*), once again, ran into two fundamental problems. On the one hand, creating communes based on a notion of appropriate population size resulted in units too spacious to be administered effectively. Such was the case in Phù Yên District where Quang Huy Commune included 10,000 people in 36 villages but spanned from 10 km in length to 1-4 km in width—all over mountainous terrain. "The Commune Committee," complained Phan Mỹ, "cannot grasp [its jurisdiction] at all." Alternatively, creating communes based on communal affinities and settlement patterns reproduced a patchwork administrative quilt, equally hard to manage. Such was the case in Văn Chấn where one Hmong commune included many non-contiguous areas interspersed by separate Dao and Thái communes.<sup>142</sup> Although spatially non-uniform communes expressed a local desire to avoid Thái domination and achieve representation, their shape was unacceptable—perhaps even unthinkable—to Kinh officials accustomed to contiguous jurisdictions. Both cases revealed the limits of using standards developed downstream and applying them in a very different socio-spatial context.

Evidently, making communes in other montane areas of Vietnam yielded similarly unwieldy jurisdiction sizes. In response, the DRV's Central Government issued revised guidelines on dividing communes in May 1953. Because "the commune is the fundamental unit of organization," stated Vice Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng, any given commune "should" (*nên*) have population and area such that commune officials enjoyed "close relations with the people and the people participated directly

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<sup>141</sup> Italics added. Anonymous, "Củng cố kinh tế tài chính vùng tự do xây dựng kinh tế tài chính vùng mới giải phóng," 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 8.

<sup>142</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 5.

in local government work.”<sup>143</sup> These guidelines incorporated regionally-specific geographic criteria to determine the shape and size of a given commune: “delta regions and midlands *prioritize population criterion*; mountain regions prioritize *length criterion*.”<sup>144</sup> At one extreme, delta regions could have as many as 3,500 residents in an area as narrow as 3 km while, at another, montane swidden cultivators could have as few as 100 residents in an area as wide as 10 km. Even if the administrative grid involved the same fundamental unit, the Central Government recognized that one size did not fit all.

The Vice Prime Minister stated clearly that the commune was “fundamental” because, in addition to administration, the unit also functioned as a “resting place (*chỗ dựa*) for the peasantry’s struggle.” His emphasis is consistent with an emerging state program for land reform, or class-based agrarian transformation. As such, his order also called for commune cadres to be “clean,” that is unsullied by “landlords, wealthy peasants, or village tyrants.” He called for the “rectification” (*chỉnh đốn*) of commune staff based on recruitment from the ranks of “landless, poor, and good middle peasants.”<sup>145</sup> Unlike the allowance for geographically adjusted area and population, however, the revised commune orders did not mention any similar adjustments for their bureaucratic composition. Recruiting cadres based on class and status-based distinctions, therefore, betrayed a growing contradiction in relation to Ethnic Policy which, in “mountain areas,” allowed for just these sorts of social cleavages to persist within local government.

Prior to this revised commune order issued in May 1953, cadres in the

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<sup>143</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Thông tư số 265-TTg v/v chỉnh đốn chính quyền cấp xã qua cuộc phát động quần chúng,” 16 May 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1376, p. 3.

<sup>144</sup> Italics in original. Delta provinces were to be composed of between 2,000 to 3,500 individuals and sized at 3 kilometers’ length; midlands of 1,000 to 2,000 at 4 km; mountains farming wet-rice of 400 to 1,000 at 6 km; mountains farming swidden at 100-500 at 10 km.

<sup>145</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Thông...” 16 May 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1376, p. 1-2.

Northwest had already begun to staff the DRV's "new local government"—i.e., nascent district, commune, and village bureaucratic positions—in urgent conditions. As mobile warfare rapidly expanded DRV territory in late 1952 and early 1953, demand for bureaucrats rose rapidly. Although the Ethnic Policy was clear on its preference for local representation overseen by "downstream cadres," the devil was in the detail of this policy's implementation. The Northwest Committee selected from three pools of candidates: locals with revolutionary credentials, Kinh cadres, and officials from the Thái Federation. Each of them carried distinct sets of problems and complications.

Because individuals with "stalwart" (*trung kiên*) backgrounds in mass organizations were few and far between, these recruits gained priority for district office.<sup>146</sup> Yet their "vigilant" performance often did not prepare them for day-to-day work as government officials.<sup>147</sup> Training and fostering (*bồi dưỡng*) them as "cadres" took time (upwards of a month or more) exceeding the urgent task of filling positions. As a result, Phan Mỹ observed, "Local cadres are few and downstream cadres are many."<sup>148</sup> Although identifying and training local candidates was an acknowledged Central Government priority, Nguyễn Khánh admitted that this task "was not yet specially attended to."<sup>149</sup> Meanwhile, the ranks of commune and village officials were in even more dire straits: a "majority" of commune officials and village heads turned out to be the same "old village chiefs" who "do not understand our government and who work by [issuing] commands."<sup>150</sup> One person approved for maintaining village law and order in Quang Huy turned out to be a "professional thief."<sup>151</sup> In another case,

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<sup>146</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 5.

<sup>147</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 9.

<sup>148</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4.

<sup>149</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 14.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>151</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 5;

Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 10.

when cadres appointed an entirely new committee *sui generis*, the new representatives had no “prestige” (*uy tín*) among their people.<sup>152</sup>

These examples illustrate the difficulties in creating a bureaucracy during a moment of rapid revolutionary transition. The few local candidates with suitable class and status backgrounds were unskilled in government administration. Training was meant to equip them with clerical skills, Vietnamese language literacy and proficiency, and an understanding of institutional norms—in short the technical knowledge of a bureaucracy. Yet identification and training took time and regional leaders were preoccupied: in short, local candidates for office with proper revolutionary credentials were few and far between.

For the time being, therefore, only Kinh cadres and former colonial officials possessed the requisite bureaucratic capacities to staff a rising DRV territorial administration. How did regional officials decide between them? In addition to technical knowledge and skills, one’s ability to lead is also predicated on an underlying relationship with those being led, or the social recognition of uneven power as legitimate. If possession of bureaucratic skills and technical knowledge are hallmarks of what Weber calls “legal authority,” then what Phan Mỹ recognized as prestige points to “traditional authority,” or a claim to legitimacy based on “age-old rule and powers.”<sup>153</sup> Although tradition must be socially reinvented, reinvested with power, and often emerges in hybrid forms, Weber’s distinction between bureaucratic and traditional authority does shed light on a pragmatic and pressing choice facing regional cadres. On what basis would Nguyễn Khánh and others choose local officials? On the one hand, they could rely on knowledgeable, bureaucratically-skilled Kinh personnel. On the other, they could recognize prestigious Thái *muang* lords in

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<sup>152</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 5.

<sup>153</sup> Weber, “The Types of Legitimate Domination” (1978), 212-231.



spite of their officially suspect backgrounds. Either choice presented complications and ultimately entailed powerful entanglements.

Although Kinh cadres knew much of DRV administration and Party policy, they often knew little about local conditions. In other words, the technical knowledge of DRV bureaucracy did not translate well into administering the Black River region. Because Kinh cadres were unfamiliar with local languages, they could only communicate through interpreters. Many of their interpreters, however, were former “puppet authorities” (*ngụy quyền*), rendering “the voice of the Government unable to reach the people.” In addition, because many “downstream” cadres hailed from urban areas or were accustomed only to their own culturally specific norms of wet-rice cultivation, they “did not yet understand the rural situation.”<sup>154</sup> For example, lowland cadres did not know how to assess wealth and poverty according to particular, local norms. During the military campaign, cadres in Nghĩa Lộ calculated household grain taxes based on average per capita village production. As a result, poor people supplied rice beyond their means and their loyalty to the revolutionary cause waned.<sup>155</sup> Notwithstanding a lack of familiarity with local customs and traditions, Kinh cadres “acted like poobahs” (*bao biện*), contributing to the “utter confusion” (*lung tung*) of committee work.<sup>156</sup> Just as in the late 1940s and earlier, many Kinh cadres often resented working in the region and requested a post “closer to their families.”<sup>157</sup>

Faced with local stalwarts unskilled in governance and Kinh cadres prone to grandiosity, misinterpretation, and homesickness, the Northwest Zone’s regional government confronted the question of how to handle former Thái Federation officials. Some escaped altogether, like Sơn La’s deposed province chief, Bạc Cầm

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<sup>154</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4-5.

<sup>155</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 8.

<sup>156</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 5.

<sup>157</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 16.

Quý, who slipped into exile.<sup>158</sup> In line with the Party's Ethnic Policy, any remaining high-level "traitors" were captured and punished, especially members of the Đèo clan. The police assembled files on members of the former regime and, in addition, relied on people to "denounce lackeys" before sending any "arch criminals" (*đại gian đại ác*) to be tried before a front tribunal.<sup>159</sup> Among others, Đèo Văn Long's nephew Đèo Văn Ngọc was found in Nghĩa Lộ working as Assistant District Chief (*Bang tá*) and living under an alias (Đang-ta-Ngọc); he was accused of laying waste to his domain as well as "torturing cadres and compatriots savagely."<sup>160</sup> By February 1953, the Northwest's Executive Party Committee reported the capture of 314 individual "reactionaries," including two commanders (*chỉ huy*) who may have led French counter-insurgency *maquis* units: Vang a Long, a Hmong leader in "Tram Tay" [Trạm Tây?], and Schooff, leader of a Dao unit in "Sai Luong" [Sài Lương?].<sup>161</sup> Processing all of these prisoners through criminal procedures took months, another indication of how slowly the new government began to function according to its own bureaucratic procedures.<sup>162</sup>

Notwithstanding cases involving such high level "traitors" and "criminals," the Government instituted a policy of leniency (*khoan hồng*) for soldiers and civilian functionaries associated with the Thái Federation. Regulars from the Thái battalions were re-educated, "won over," and released, a gesture that increased support among soldiers' families for the DRV.<sup>163</sup> Moreover, former Federation officials retained

<sup>158</sup> Dinh Van Lo, "Who Are The Thaidam?" *The Channel* (Fall, 1998). Retrieved online 8 May 2008 at: <http://eden.clmer.csulb.edu/netshare/kclam/APA/NAF98.htm#Thaidam>.

<sup>159</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 6.

<sup>160</sup> Anonymous, "Trích báo cáo tình hình công tác ở vùng mới giải phóng Tây Bắc (báo cáo đầu tháng 11-1952)," November 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306.

<sup>161</sup> ĐLĐVN, "Báo cáo..." 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6.

<sup>162</sup> As of mid-April 1953, only 75 had been tried and, of these, 12 were imprisoned. Nguyễn Kháng, "Báo cáo..." 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 8.

<sup>163</sup> The 5,024 captured enemy combatants included 1,000 "Africans" and 4,000 "puppet soldiers." Party members were more suspicious of the officers but, like soldiers from North Africa, available sources do not indicate what became of them. Nguyễn Kháng, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 1,6; Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 5.

comparable positions in DRV-recognized communes and villages. Their retention elicited far more equivocal results among the population and increasing concern among regional officials.

“Organizing the local government,” observed Nguyễn Khánh in late December 1952, “has brought along all sort of reactionary traitors, leading the people to resent and dislike the local government.” He observed that Thái lords (*phìa*) held influential positions as commune chairmen (Mường Trai, Mường La) or on their distribution committees (Chiềng Đông, Yên Châu), enabling them to divert “national” labor and food aid to their own households, shirk labor service, avoid taxation, and remain in control of common fields. Evidently, their traditional authority outmatched any bureaucratic authority held by stalwarts. Overall, he worried that these “comrades” did not grasp the importance of “building a government and using the government to execute each Party policy and, by contrast, still do whatever—sickening and loosening the trust between people and local government.” For Nguyễn Khánh, the region’s Party Political Commissar, the problem *and* solution lay in (lack of) compliance with Ethnic Policy and (lack of) Kinh cadres. District committees did not have the requisite number of “downstream cadres” to oversee their activities, “violating the Center’s orders,” and he assured his superiors that the Zone had ordered a “correction.”<sup>164</sup>

What Nguyễn Khánh observed was part of an emerging pattern. Central Government policy on labor service, taxation, and agrarian reform all reflected efforts to adjust payments along a progressive scale. The elite’s domination of local government disrupted the channel of state power at its most basic level, defeating its redistributive intent and intercepting its benefits. Indeed, DRV recognition of traditional authorities in bureaucratic positions enabled them to bend or obstruct the implementation of policy to their own advantage. The old guard’s continued presence

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<sup>164</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 8- 10.

in the new regime risked alienating poor peasants who had supported the revolution at great personal risk and, moreover, whom the revolution was ostensibly to benefit.

Subsequent to Nguyễn Khánh's report and over the next few months of institutionalizing DRV rule, the region's Party Committee worked with districts to "reinspect" the backgrounds and personnel files of local government representatives. On the one hand, their findings revealed "many major errors" among local government officials. In six surveyed districts of Sơn La and Lai Châu, between 60-95% of commune representatives and village heads were "old puppet authorities" and hailed from Thái hereditary nobility (*Phìa tạo*). Yet, except for some egregious cases requiring dismissal, the Committee also acknowledged that many of these "former puppets" had brought along skills and specialized local knowledge that made them "comrades" suitable for DRV local government.<sup>165</sup> On the other hand, their findings revealed the results of what Nguyễn Khánh had proposed to do to solve these problems, i.e. to rely on "downstream" Party members. As of February 1953, of the Zone's total 513 official VWP Party-member cadres, 425 were identified as "ethnic Kinh" and only 18 as "ethnic minority."<sup>166</sup> The new Kinh Party regime became inextricably bound up with a Thái bureaucracy carried over from the old.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> The districts were: Mường La, Phù Yên, Mộc Châu, Mai Sơn, Yên Châu, and Điện Biên. Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 4; Đảng LĐVN, "Báo cáo..." 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6; Duong Hồng Quang, "Việc chiếm hữu ruộng đất và thể lực phong kiến tại vùng dân tộc Thái ở Tây Bắc," 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370.

<sup>166</sup> The only available statistic on regional Party membership reads as: "Of the total 513 cadres, 5 are KUV [Zonal Committee Representatives, or "Khu Ủy viên"], 49 TUV [Provincial], 224 HUV [District], 235 commune cadres; regarding their ethnic backgrounds, 18 minority cadres, 425 Kinh cadres." Note that numbers of "minority" and "Kinh" cadres adds up to only 443. What were the backgrounds of the remaining 70? Perhaps they were Chinese advisors? ĐLĐVN, "Báo cáo..." 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 12.

<sup>167</sup> An inherited colonial bureaucracy was a problem not only in Vietnam more broadly but, for example, Indonesia as well. Cf., Dang Phong and Melanie Beresford, *Authority Relations and Economic Decision-Making in Vietnam* (Copenhagen: NIAS, 1995), 17; Benedict Anderson, "Old State, New Society: Indonesia's New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective," *Journal of Asian Studies* 42 (1983), 477-496.

By March 1953 spatial patterns began to emerge with respect to the Northwest Zone's free and newly liberated areas. Free areas in the Zone's eastern reaches of Yên Bái had "long established government" where cadres and representatives had been "authenticated." Yet assessments of recently liberated areas in the Zone's western provinces of Sơn La and Lai Châu were far more equivocal: "regarding our local government, enemy puppet authorities have been wiped out and new government established but the backgrounds of a vast majority are puppet authorities."<sup>168</sup> This statement betrays a contradictory form of double-speak: if old officials were truly "wiped out" (*xoa bỏ*), how did they hang on in the new regime? Moreover, many communes in Sơn La and Lai Châu "still had no local government," indicating, perhaps, that Federation officials continued as before even in areas of nominal DRV control.<sup>169</sup> While the eastern province of Nghĩa Lộ instituted training sessions to school officials in "democratic sensibility" by late December 1952, the western provinces of Sơn La and Lai Châu reported comparable sessions only as of mid-April 1953.<sup>170</sup> In other words, the further west one traveled, the more the change in rule appeared to be a change in name only: the bureaucracy remained much the same.

Based on the use of "*Phìa*," or Thái lord, in association with DRV-recognized local leaders, many—if not all—of the examples cited above appear to come from *muang* areas of historic Thái settlement and spatialized relations of domination. What about leadership of non-Thái social groups inhabiting the slopes and mountains between the Thái-dominated valleys? Although the sources are largely silent on this question, the strange case of "Khu Mèo 99" or "Hmong Zone 99" provides a revealing glimpse. In December 1952, Nguyễn Khánh located this Hmong Zone in Sơn La

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<sup>168</sup> ĐLĐVN, "Báo cáo..." 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 16.

<sup>169</sup> Areas with "local government not yet established" included 3 communes in Mường La, 11 communes in Sông Mã, 7 communes in Điện Biên, and 3 communes in Sìn Hồ. *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>170</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 9; Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 15-16.

province either in the district of Phù Yên or lying alongside it. Unlike other districts, where, “governments are being established,” he stated that Hmong Zone 99 “still allowed the old regime principle” with a distinct set of local rulers bearing titles distinct from any recent or ongoing forms of rule, i.e. contemporary DRV, French Military Territory, and Thái Federation.<sup>171</sup> In fact, the titles of “thong ly, thong quan, Xa phai” most likely originated with recognition of local leaders by Chinese dynastic courts dating as far back as the 6<sup>th</sup> century!<sup>172</sup>

In March 1953, while reporting that many communes in the Zone’s west had “no local government,” Nguyễn Khánh reported “separately” (*riêng*) on Hmong Zone 99, referring to it as an “old base area” (*cơ sở cũ*)—implicitly indicating long-standing ties between local residents and early revolutionary guerilla activity.<sup>173</sup> Cadres working there, he explained, had “still not yet established local government because they evaluated the people’s level as too low, did not believe they had reached the proper level for local government.” This is a language of cultural superiority and alleged inferiority. “Although the upper class is rightist deviationist (*hữu khuynh*),” he continued, “they still have prestige among the people and we have held onto old leaders (*thong ly*).”<sup>174</sup> Notwithstanding their allegedly distasteful political sensibilities, traditional authority remained in place as before. In contrast to neighboring Thái areas,

<sup>171</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 9.

<sup>172</sup> As per usual in early DRV reports, diacritic marks are missing and the signified Chinese character remains ambiguous. “Thong quan” might refer to “Thống quân,” a title dating to the Northern Wei (Bắc Ngụy) and Tang (Đường) periods from 5<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries meaning a position akin to “general” or military leader. Perhaps the report’s author misspelled “tổng” as “thong”; the former was a generic administrative title used by the Nguyễn court, in which case “tổng ly” means a “rural notable or dignitary” and “tổng quân” a supply and local military leader—a title with origins dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> c. Chen dynasty (Bắc Chu) and renewed by the 14<sup>th</sup> c. Lê court. “Xa phai” could be “xã phái,” a Sino-Viet word for commune delegate; alternatively, it could be a Hmong word with an entirely different meaning. Whatever the origins or original meanings, community members used these titles to legitimize local rule when encountering the latest in a long line of extralocal sovereigns. Đỗ Văn Ninh, *Từ điển Chức quan Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Thanh niên, 2006), 801, 854, 858-859.

<sup>173</sup> Reportedly from June 1952, but perhaps much earlier. Cao Văn Lương et al, *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân Khu Tây Bắc* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 2003), 341.

<sup>174</sup> ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6.

therefore, not even the titles of officials in this one Hmong area changed. Given the titles appear to date from a period long before French colonial rule, their acceptance by DRV officials indicates the persistence of an externally-recognized, culturally-specific set of Hmong ruling relations. Indeed, the DRV would later recognize “Hmong Zone 99” and two other Hmong “Ethnic Districts” (Mu-cang-chai, Tua chua) as Hmong Autonomous Districts (*Châu Mèo tự trị*) within the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone in 1955.<sup>175</sup>

By mid-April 1953, the Party’s Northwest Committee “still” had yet to “authenticate” all ranks of local government. Yet, by now, official language had changed from a concern with “old puppet authorities” to a concern with class and status background. The Committee reported that “landlords, rich peasants, and gentry” composed “most” of the leadership on a “majority” of Committees and Front organizations. Regional leaders worried that allowing a re-emergent local elite to remain in local offices—precisely those institutions that represented “the state” to “the people” in everyday affairs—risked the new government’s legitimacy. In contrast to an ideal of radiant light, their institutional role was “dim” (*lu mờ*) because the personnel effectively “obstruct the implementation of Party and Government policy.”<sup>176</sup>

In addition to local government, the Party Committee also expressed grave concern over composition of the police force, the very institution charged with regulating and inspecting (i.e., “authenticating”) local government personnel. In compliance with a Central Decision, the Northwest Committee reported on personnel files assembled from each police post (*ty*). They found “many rather serious facts,” such as the post in Lào Cai where 80% of policemen had “relations with the enemy”;

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<sup>175</sup> Anonymous, “Tình hình khái quát về Khu Tự trị dân tộc Thái Mèo ở Tây Bắc,” May 1955, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 22, p. 2.

<sup>176</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6-7.

many had worked with Japanese occupiers; and many had served as soldiers with, and/or attended the military academy of, the Nationalist Party (*Quốc Dân Đảng*).<sup>177</sup> Although Lào Cai's police ranks appeared to be an extreme case, the findings exhibit a broader pattern. As a highly-contested frontier in the remaking, the region's complex and mutable relations of rule rendered labels such as a single "enemy" opposed to a single "friend" overly simplistic. Nonetheless, Party officials and regional leaders used these labels to enforce—and justify—their singularizing political project.

The shift in language noted above, from worries about old officials in the new regime to preoccupations with their class and status background, indicated a larger reorientation as to how to regulate Vietnam's emerging relations of rule. Shortly after the Northwest Committee's April report, Phạm Văn Đồng issued orders in May 1953 to select commune officials with "clean" (*trong sạch*) class backgrounds consistent with an emerging program of national, class-based land reform. This order not only conflicted with both the Ethnic Policy's emphasis on building a united front among "ethnic minority" peoples (i.e., encouraging elite participation in government) *and* the leniency policy's allowance for colonial officials to do the same. His policy also conflicted with the ongoing and profoundly uneven implementation of land reform: as discussed below, the "Northwest" stood in stark contrast to other parts of "Vietnam." More than recognizing old officials in new guise, reproducing traditional authority was also a matter of reproducing elite control over the means of agrarian production. What may have been a pragmatic choice, therefore, opened the emerging DRV regime to a potentially damning contradiction: collaborating with the same reactionary traitors, feudalists, and enemies the so-called people's revolution sought to replace.

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<sup>177</sup> Reference to "trung sy quan QĐĐ" is ambiguous, most likely referring to the Vietnam Nationalist Party but, perhaps, to its (allied) Chinese Nationalist Party. Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 8.



***(Not) reforming land relations***

Just as the People's Army enforced a nation-state claim on the Northwest and cadres set about (re)constructing DRV institutions, Central Party leaders moved mass mobilization for land reform to the top of its agenda. For revolutionary leaders and their supporters alike, this temporal coincidence in early 1953 raised a spatial question: how to proceed with revolutionary land reform in forcibly acquired territory? On the one hand, advancing a united front and implementing the Party's Ethnic Policy had meant appealing to rich peasant as well as poor. Yet these same social positions rested on their historically unequal access to land resources. So, on the other hand, the Party-state's decision on what to do about land relations risked losing the support of one class-identified group or another. The DRV's public agenda for revolutionary social transformation was at odds with its own underlying territorial imperative.

If access to productive land is central to social reproduction in agrarian societies, then the Black River region has long illustrated this rule. For this historic hinterland, where labor was relatively scarce and land seemingly abundant, the mountainous topography meant that choice irrigable land was actually in short supply. Thái Federation rule had re-empowered hereditary Thái nobility accustomed to the *muang* form and granted them control over irrigable land, labor, taxation, and residence. The peasants who grew irrigated rice in the Federation's system had only partial control over their labor and even less control over land. During the 1952 Northwest Campaign, peasants impressed DRV officials by working "day and night to meet the harvest, not letting fields go fallow" in spite of strafing and bombing by French warplanes. They greeted the "liberators" with calls to redistribute wet-rice fields equally among them, particularly land held by the Thái nobility in common (*ruộng công*) and land used to pay Federation officials (*ruộng chức*). "Almost everywhere in each and every place," observed the Northwest's Party Committee,

“people who have no wet-rice land ask the Government to divide the land of traitors and officials on the people’s behalf; the people’s general aspiration is desire for even redistribution of common land.”<sup>178</sup>

The “Government,” however, was loath to risk elite Thái support for fear of losing its recent territorial gains. If VWP and DRV leadership heard the calls of the region’s poor peasants, then they listened to the Prime Minister’s delegate. Although “the Northwest generally and Thái majority areas particularly have many complex social problems, many feudal relationships,” observed Phan Mỹ, he warned that, “if cadres do not investigate [problems and relationships] thoroughly, do not adhere to guidelines closely, then the reactionary feudalists can easily spread counter propaganda.”<sup>179</sup> In early 1953, central Party leadership reversed united front policy and approved measures on how to deal with a “feudal” and “exploitative” regime, i.e. to smash it. Yet peremptorily stripping the Thái elite of land privileges aggravated tensions between them and cadres.<sup>180</sup> In the Northwest Zone, therefore, the VWP suspended this prescription in favor of caution and delay, ordering cadres to conduct “careful research on the complex problem” and to develop detailed plans that only the Center could approve.<sup>181</sup> In other words, pursuing an alliance with Thái elites was unsavory but necessary to maintain tenuous social and territorial control.

Over the next year, the spatial limits of ostensibly “national” agrarian transformation became clear through a series of orders issued by the Central Government and enforced by the Northwest Zone’s Party Committee. Ultimately, the evolving Ethnic Policy and agrarian reform agenda converged to declare the

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<sup>178</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 3.

<sup>179</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4.

<sup>180</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 3;

ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 5, 12-13;

McAlister (1967), 812.

<sup>181</sup> “Báo cáo tại hội nghị ban chấp hành Trung ương lần thứ tư về công tác mặt trận,” *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14 yr 1953 (2001), 112-118.

Northwest Zone an “ethnic minority area,” exempting it from the full extent of state-directed agrarian change.<sup>182</sup> Throughout DRV-controlled Vietnam, soldiers, local officials, and poor peasants chafed at the slow rate of change.<sup>183</sup> In the Northwest Zone, they responded to Central Government decisions and regional enforcement with a sense of betrayal, revealing tensions between center and emergent frontier as well as splits within “the state” itself. Exploring how, why, and to what effect agrarian reform differed in the Northwest offers insight into the terms of national inclusion, the absorption and reproduction of traditional authority, and the spatial heterogeneity of rule. What emerges is a tale of accommodating an ethnicized social hierarchy, elite resistance to even modest change, and conflict over the revolutionary agenda.

In early 1953, as cadres took stock of land relations in the Northwest Zone, the question of agrarian reform took on new urgency in Central Party discussions in the Việt Bắc base area. In January, the Workers’ Party convened its Central Committee’s 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum during which discussions on linking land reform to anti-colonial struggle featured prominently. In respective speeches inspired by the “great success” of land reform in the People’s Republic of China, President Hồ Chí Minh and Party Secretary Trường Chinh declared it time to commence the first stages of agrarian land reform through a process of mobilizing the masses.<sup>184</sup> The struggle against foreign imperialism, explained Trường Chinh, could succeed only by striking feudalism at home, making land reform the “crux” of the national democratic revolution. He declared, “*The national democratic revolution is a peasant revolution. The war of*

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<sup>182</sup> Trần Phương, ed., *Cách mạng ruộng đất ở Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1968), 218.

<sup>183</sup> Christine K. Pelzer White, “Land Reform and National Liberation in Vietnam,” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1981), 149-150.

<sup>184</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Báo cáo tại Hội nghị lần thứ tư Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng,” 25 Jan 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 14-29; Trường Chinh, “Báo cáo của Tổng bí thư tại hội nghị lần thứ tư Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng (khoá II),” *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 30-83.

*national liberation is also, essentially, a peasant war.*”<sup>185</sup> Nonetheless, the Secretary recognized that such a potentially divisive program required a broad mandate. Thus, he called for a vigorous discussion “at all levels” and declared that the National Assembly would meet to debate and decide on the issue of land reform, which they did (for the first time in seven years) in December 1953. The aims of national liberation (i.e., anti-colonial war) and agrarian revolution (i.e., class-based social transformation) now converged—and conflicted.

The modified central policy left the desired ends of land reform and the stages in which it unfolded much the same. Agrarian reform had begun several years earlier in 1951 with the implementation and centralization of a progressive agricultural tax.<sup>186</sup> Early stages of land reform proper commenced with rent and interest reduction; and then proceeded with the confiscation and redistribution of land held both by “traitors” and in common.<sup>187</sup> Only later, when conditions permitted, would land reform evolve into full-scale, equitable land redistribution or, “land to the tiller” (*người cày có ruộng*).<sup>188</sup> In the DRV’s emerging territory and among its subject population at large, these stages played out between 1953-56 and were followed by a “rectification of errors campaign” in 1957.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Italics in original. Trường Chinh, “Báo cáo của Tổng...” *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 53.

<sup>186</sup> Like land reform, the PRC inspired this model of taxation. Cf., Qiang Zhai (2000), 36. Similarly, its application varied according to context and conditions.

<sup>187</sup> Attempting to counter the DRV’s radical agrarian reform agenda, in April 1953 the (Associated) State of Vietnam (*Chánh phủ Quốc gia*) led by Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Tâm established the Farmers Trade Union of Vietnam’s North (*Nghệp-đoàn nhà-nông Bắc-Việt; Syndicat des Agriculteurs au Nord Viêt-Nam*). The Union offered a conservative agrarian platform based on reducing tax rates, providing credit, and protecting the rights of tenant farmers. “Tài liệu của địch tuyên truyền về công tác cuộc cải cách điền địa do Thủ tướng bù nhìn Nguyễn Văn Tâm chủ trương và xuyên tạc chính sách phát động quần chúng của ta năm 1953,” 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1394.

<sup>188</sup> This is also title of a volume by Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp that first proposed radical land reform. For an English translation, cf., *The Peasant Question, 1937-1938*, trans. Christine White (Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell University, 1974).

<sup>189</sup> Overall, the process was divisive and violent; in 1957, over half of those who had been treated as landlords were reclassified. Edwin Moise, *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 260-262; Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 45-46.

What did change, and what mattered most in 1953, was a new campaign to “mobilize the masses” (*phát động quần chúng*) as the force used to implement agrarian reform.<sup>190</sup> If equitable land distribution was still the desired end result, then mass mobilization was now its means. Prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum, Party policy had admonished peasants to please wait, to adhere to the united front in favor of forming a broad anti-colonial resistance. Now, Trường Chinh and Hồ Chí Minh encouraged the peasants to press forward with their demands, to rally around their class interests, and to strike landlords.<sup>191</sup> “The content of mass mobilization,” stated Trường Chinh, “is to lead the peasants in the struggle against traitors and village tyrants,” and, through such mass action, to weaken the power of “feudal” control in rural areas.<sup>192</sup> The “enemy” was no longer just an externalized foreign colonial bandit; now its meaning had shifted and expanded subtly to include an internalized feudal criminal. Yet, as the following discussion of the Northwest indicates, the presence or absence of officially-recognized “ethnicity” among the DRV’s subject populations rendered the persecution of alleged class crimes spatially uneven.

Of course, as the President and Party Secretary both emphasized, leadership of such popular action was reserved for the DRV and the VWP. Following the Chinese example, they ceased to entrust agrarian reform to local cadres, authorities, and mass organizations because of their suspect class backgrounds. Instead, teams of specially-trained cadres traveled to each commune to learn from and educate its poorest constituents by practicing the “three together,” i.e. working, living, eating together.<sup>193</sup> These cadres arrived with orders to reorganize Farmers Councils (*Nông hội*), local mass organizations considered the “nucleus” (*nòng cốt*) for rural reform. After

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<sup>190</sup> Moise (1983), 173-174.

<sup>191</sup> White (1981), 150-153; Pelley (2002), 204.

<sup>192</sup> Trường Chinh, “Báo cáo...” *Văn kiện Đảng* vol, 14 yr 1953 (2001), 70.

<sup>193</sup> Or, “ba cùng.” Moise (1983), 173.

reforming Farmers Councils, these cadres would then lead the “rectification” of *all* commune level institutions—including Party cells—by replacing membership with mostly poor and landless (and some middle) peasants.<sup>194</sup> Farmers Councils thus played a crucial dual role both in land reform and the reorganization of local government. In this way, DRV and Party leaders increased their own capacity to regulate village-based power relations and to mobilize agrarian resources.<sup>195</sup>

Even during the Northwest Campaign itself, local Party reports document popular discussion of these issues and signal an awareness of debates among the DRV’s central leadership. Once again, in late February, the Zone’s Party officials forwarded requests from “each and every place where some people do not own land” to redistribute equitably the land held by traitors, officials, and in common.<sup>196</sup> For cadres in and peoples of the Northwest, however, following the Central Government’s response meant delaying land reform indefinitely and curtailing mass mobilization.

Central Government and Party orders in spring 1953 invoked a special status for the Northwest and other “ethnic minority areas.” Decree 149-SL of 12 April 1953 issued a formal mandate both to reduce rent and interest as well as to redistribute land commonly held and confiscated from “traitors.”<sup>197</sup> Just after Decree 149-SL was promulgated, however, the Party’s Central Executive Committee issued a companion order to limit its implementation. Party Secretary Trường Chinh instructed cadres in “areas of entirely ethnic minorities, especially those areas still adhering to a hereditary nobility,” to postpone mass mobilization.<sup>198</sup> Only in select “ethnic minority areas” and

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<sup>194</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Thông tư số 265-TTg...” 16 May 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1376, p. 3; “Thông tri của Ban bí thư,” 16 July 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 262-263.

<sup>195</sup> Dang and Beresford (1998), 25-26.

<sup>196</sup> ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 5.

<sup>197</sup> Sắc lệnh của Chủ tịch nước Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hoà số 149-SL. 12 Apr 1953. Accessed 23 June 2008 at <<http://www.chinhphu.vn/>>.

<sup>198</sup> “Chỉ thị của Ban Chấp hàng Trung ương về phát động quần chúng trong năm 1953,” 24 April 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 182.

only with approval from the Party's "upper level" could mass mobilization proceed. Even then, several strict criteria applied: participation of qualified local cadres; "ethnic unity" based on "equality, interdependence, cooperation, fraternity"; respect for the masses' customs and beliefs. If and when "mass mobilization" were to be carried out, his instructions warned, "*do not allow class struggle to evolve into disagreement between ethnicities.*"<sup>199</sup> Indeed, the center's fear of ethnically-coded unrest in the Northwest Zone largely forestalled radical efforts to lead class-based reform there. From their perspective, not only was the Zone's territory "strategic and important" because of its borders and frontiers, it was also home to a population of "entirely ethnic minorities."

Such directives indicate the intent of Trường Chinh and Party leadership to maintain tight control over mass mobilization for land reform broadly and in "ethnic minority areas" particularly. In response, the Northwest Zone's Party Committee in spring 1953 departed from its earlier advocacy on behalf of landless peasants to comply with the Party line. As the region's highest VWP office, the Zonal Committee closely monitored the process and disciplined any "errors" in the field. In line with the Party guidelines and criteria above, the Zone's regional officials implemented these measures on a very small scale and only in limited areas. Efforts at transforming agrarian land relations followed the same tripartite spatial matrix—zones considered free, newly liberated, or occupied—used to regulate the construction of state institutions. In general, agrarian reform began in free zones before moving to areas more recently "liberated." Only the agricultural tax was broadly applied. In terms of land reform proper, in those few areas where conditions permitted, teams of cadres were sent to work with Farmers Councils to reduce land rents and to redistribute a portion of land held by "traitors." Even given such limited implementation, however, a

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<sup>199</sup> Italics in original. *Ibid.*

re-emergent elite sabotaged each stage of agrarian reform.

In 1952 and into 1953, the Northwest's landed proprietors resisted taxation and demonstrated their continuing power in relation to state institutions charged with reforming agrarian relations of production. In so doing, they established a pattern that would characterize early efforts at agrarian reforms there more generally. "The class of landlords, rich peasants, [and] hereditary nobility," wrote the Zone's Political Commissar in mid-April 1953, "still find ways to make false declarations of area and yield and disperse their fields in order to reduce their contributions..."<sup>200</sup> Indeed, elite resistance to taxation indicates their collective strength as well as the weak institutionalization of agrarian reforms.

Even in free zones, efforts at land reform proper were similarly thwarted by elites bent on maintaining control over land. As of January 1953, in Yên Bái and Lào Cai, wealthy peasants and landlords continued to charge "excessive" rent either in secret or undermined rent control by claiming payment in labor. They also seized capital (seedstock, draft animals) cadres had just distributed to the poor.<sup>201</sup> By late February, what little land redistribution had occurred in these two provinces—13 fields confiscated from French cultivators and "traitors"—was beset by difficulties. Once cadres left a village, poor farmers often returned the fields to their former owners, a pattern that points to the continuing power of local elites. Traders (not farmers) improperly received a share. Cadres allocated land on quantity alone and did not attend to its productive quality, leaving poor farmers—once again—farming land of poor fertility.<sup>202</sup> In short, elite resistance to agrarian reforms overpowered cadres' limited efforts to organize poor peasants and expand access to the means of agrarian

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<sup>200</sup> Nguyễn Kháng, "Báo cáo..." 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 5.

<sup>201</sup> Đảng LĐVN, "Báo cáo..." 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 11.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.



production.

In light of these experiences in free zones, the Zone's Party Committee evaluated Farmers Councils and local party infrastructure as weak and unclear about Central Government policy. Though membership in Farmers Councils and other front organizations had soared, members still lacked sufficient "education" and their activities were "disconnected."<sup>203</sup> In response to these and other calls for clarification and guidance, the Central Government would issue revised guidelines in September.

Meanwhile, by mid-April, newly liberated zones in Sơn La and Lai Châu further illustrated the fraught nature of agrarian reform. The Province of Lai Châu established a "policy" (*chủ trương*) to reserve a portion of land held in common to furnish commune officials and village heads with royalties, effectively re-institutionalizing an old Thái practice. In several (re)liberated districts of Sơn La such as Mường La, Tuần Giáo, and Quỳnh Nhai, local cadres took the initiative to redistribute official and common land to poor peasants. In addition to extending poor peasants their sympathies and a concrete solution to their poverty, local cadres aimed to fulfill the intent of another policy (to boost production) by bringing fallow land into production during the upcoming growing season. Yet each of these efforts met with a reprimand from the Zone's Party Committee for violating the Center's cautionary policy, for "solving the land problem hastily." Whether the local response to land reform was reactionary or radical, the Committee issued the same order to both deviants, instructing Lai Châu province and Sơn La's local cadres to "repair these errors." Further, the Zone's Party leadership ordered local cadres to study the problem of class and land ownership in order to prepare for future mass mobilization.<sup>204</sup>

In September, a proposal specified the character of "mass mobilization" in the

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>204</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 11, 18.

Northwest Zone.<sup>205</sup> Introducing “this important area in our country” in terms of its “strategic importance” for the military, the program described how mass mobilization would apply to this “ethnic minority area.” This is a two-fold claim, both to territory and on subject populations, and a militarized prescription for securing both. The proposal assessed the region’s unique social conditions and noted the persistence under French colonial rule of a Thái hereditary landed nobility (*phìa tạo*) commanding bonded labor (*cuông nguột*). Similar to Trường Chinh’s assessment of “Vietnam” as a whole, these conditions “clearly prove[d] [that] imperialism and feudalism closely collude with one another.” Whereas for Central Party leaders the collusion of domestic and foreign exploitation merited a national program of mass mobilization for land reform to smash feudalism, by contrast, the particular character of this Northwestern collusion now only merited mass mobilization there as such, i.e. divorced from reforming land relations.<sup>206</sup> “The goal of this mobilization is *principally political*,” reads the proposal, “this is not the mass mobilization to implement land reform like in downstream areas.” Whereas mass action undergirded land reform in downstream deltas, mass action was deliberately separated from land reform in upstream mountains. In recently liberated “ethnic minority areas of the Northwest,” orders the proposal, “*to mobilize the masses is to topple traitors to the Vietnamese nation, sweep out remnants of enemy armies, spring a surprise attack on local bandits, construct a people’s government...*”<sup>207</sup> Without land reform, what remained in the vessel of “mass mobilization” was, essentially, a military program to ferret out Federation and French forces and a political program to remake and incorporate a loyal Thái elite.

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<sup>205</sup> Anonymous, “Đề nghị về việc vận động quần chúng ở vùng dân tộc thiểu số mới giải phóng thuộc Tây-Bắc,” Sept 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1258.

<sup>206</sup> The text states: “According to the Central Government’s general orders on mass mobilization for land reform (37/CT/TW), areas of ethnic minorities with regimes of hereditary nobility and Thái lords (*chế độ thổ ty, phìa tạo*) do not mobilize the masses by implementing land reform.” *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>207</sup> Italics in original. *Ibid.*

If “national unity” always euphemizes an unequal distribution of power relations, then its function in an emerging Vietnam had spatially and temporally specific dimensions. Downstream it disguised an ascendant agrarian proletariat while upstream it cloaked a renewed, ethnicized agrarian aristocracy. In the Northwest Zone, much to the chagrin of local revolutionaries and poor peasants, a particular form of pan-ethnic mobilization took precedence over class-based action for social transformation. According to the September clarification, this “preliminary” (*sơ bộ*) form of mobilization took into account the Northwest’s different “level” (*trình độ*) in relation to “our country.”<sup>208</sup> In this region, a “unified ethnic front” (*mặt trận dân tộc thống nhất*) took on a specifically “broad” character to “include all ethnicities and all classes who love the country, resist French imperialism and national traitors.” As long as one declared loyalty to the new regime, the Government overlooked one’s involvement in class crimes. In “newly liberated areas,” as long as Thái lords were not “traitorous,” the order not only permitted bonded labor (*cuông nguột*) but went further by advocating it as “advantageous” in Thái Federation-held areas of “not yet liberated” Lai Châu!<sup>209</sup> In the short term then, “liberation” portended profoundly different meanings in a highly stratified society: renewing privilege for an elite and bondage for poor peasants. This long-awaited clarification sent a clear message to cadres in the field: in order to facilitate militarized territorial expansion, they should incorporate loyal elites and not disturb the foundations of their power and prestige.

By prioritizing the category of ethnicity over class or gender, the Party-state afforded male Thái elites ample opportunity to reproduce their control over land, labor, and office. In addition to the “tricks” aimed at dodging agrarian reform, these same elites had completed the circle by staffing emergent institutions charged with

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<sup>208</sup> Anon., “Đề nghị...” Sept 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1258, p. 2, 3.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

implementing policy emanating from the Central Government, the Party's Central Committee, and the Zone's Party Committee. That Thái elites composed a majority of officials in a majority of local government offices illustrates their continued hold on bureaucratic power as well. Later, after the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign, the Zone's Party officials in October 1954 called what they contributed (un)intentionally to creating—and what was still in effect—an “ethnic contradiction.”<sup>210</sup>

How did conditions look on the ground? Answering this question builds on a report by Duong Hong Quang dated 22 November 1953, entitled, “Land holding and feudal power in ethnic Thái areas of the Northwest.”<sup>211</sup> The report required translation into “Vietnamese letters” and its text is accompanied by Chinese characters, perhaps indicating that its author was an advisor from the PRC and his name an alias. The identity of the author is significant not only because it may indicate how, and to what degree, Chinese advisors participated in the DRV's land reform.<sup>212</sup> Moreover, that the author may not have been Vietnamese and therefore not a VWP member, perhaps enabled him to disagree so emphatically with the Northwest Party Secretary. At a conference in September 1953, the Secretary had opined that “the Thái lords (*phìa tạo*) have no economic power (*thế lực*)” and, as such, the “alleged Thái lords” were, in fact, only “landlords” (*địa chủ*) and, further, that village chiefs (*tạo bản*) were simply

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<sup>210</sup> Or, “*mâu thuẫn dân tộc*.” Note the Maoist language of contradiction. Le Trung Dinh, UBHC Khu TB, “Báo cáo kiểm điểm công tác xây dựng Khu Tây Bắc từ ngày thành lập đến nay (7/1952-7/1954) trước hội nghị kháng chiến hành chính và chuyên môn khu họp lần đầu tiên,” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 13. Cf., Mao Tse-Tung, “On Contradiction,” in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* vol. 2 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, LTD, 1954), 13-53.

<sup>211</sup> Report stored in two archival files, perhaps indicating significance and circulation. One addressed to the VWP's “Center,” its parenthetical subtitle “(the second report on conditions in the Northwest)” indicates a first report which I did not locate. Anonymous, “Việc chiếm hữu ruộng đất và thế lực phong kiến tại vùng dân tộc Thái ở Tây Bắc,” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1258; Duong-Hong-Quang, “Việc...” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370.

<sup>212</sup> Zhai (2000); Moise (1983).

“middle peasants” (*trung nông*).<sup>213</sup> In response, Duong Hồng Quang noted, parenthetically, “on what basis?” His report provides a closely argued and richly documented rebuttal based on regional data as well as a field survey conducted subsequently in Quang Huy commune, Phù Yên district, Sơn La province. The following analysis draws on his findings.

The Cầm clan’s success at retaining office and dominating land access in a corner of Sơn La serves as a concrete example of a broader pattern. Emerging DRV rule reproduced regionally-specific, locally-inflected, mutually-constituted relations of rule and production.

Originally, prominent Cầm clan members had held positions in the colonial regime but fled into exile once they turned to support the revolution. After the Northwest Campaign, they returned to positions of prominence. Cầm Văn Nô became district chair of Phù Yên. Among his two sons, one became secretary of Quang Huy commune’s Party cell and earned a seat on the district’s standing committee; the other served in the military as a political officer. All three were Party members. Enscorced in these positions, through “work as our cadres,” they also maintained a grip on “good land” while poor peasants continued to labor on “poor land.” In Quang Huy, 67 of 240 families claimed membership in the Cầm clan (28%), enabling a powerful minority to claim a majority of land, or 126 of 173 *mẫu Thái* (73%); 130 other families controlled the remaining 46 *mẫu* (27%) and 36 families were left landless.<sup>214</sup> Just as male Thái elites regained positions of official power, they also managed—through covert resistance and overt participation in political processes—to hold onto land resources

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<sup>213</sup> The Secretary argued that Thái lords “do not have official land to exploit the people, do not command labor” according to either “regime” of “*cuông*” or “*nguộc*.” His remarks both deny conditions on the ground and assert false equivalence between two culturally specific ideas of class and status. Duong Hồng Quang, “Việc...” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370, p. 5.

<sup>214</sup> The *mẫu Thái* unit of land area varied locally. In this case, one *mẫu Thái* ranged from 1-2 hectares. Duong Hồng Quang, “Việc...” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370, p. 2, 7-8.

and maintain economic power as well.

Although the Central Government was most concerned about inter-ethnic divisions (i.e., threats to “national unity”), the Black River region’s many societies were also divided intra-ethnically along lines of class, status, gender, and age. Even within a given ethnicity or, further, within a given ethnically homogenous settlement, relations among “peasants” were predicated on a hierarchical ordering of access and control to land and labor resources. Among the Thái, noble senior males allocated land rights.<sup>215</sup> And these unequal social relations of land and rule were persisting through a period of what was, ostensibly, to be their revolutionary change.

This renewal of elite power revealed a contradiction in the revolutionary program as it unfolded in the Northwest. Because Central Government and Party leadership prioritized expanding territorial control, they reproduced elite control over office, land, and labor. The Central Government’s interest in maintaining stable rule, therefore, undermined its program of agrarian reform. Furthermore, another even larger inequality was off the table: redistributing wet-rice land controlled disproportionately by Thái elites to Hmong, Dao, Khu Mu, and other swidden cultivators was not even mentioned. Refigured as the Northwest Zone, the Black River region was becoming an exceptional “ethnic” place existing, uncomfortably at times, within the bounds of national space.

This exceptional place enjoyed *de facto* local autonomy during the war and its *de jure* form afterwards, following the establishment in 1955 of what would be called the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone. During the anti-colonial war, the Party-state’s decision to forego transforming rural relations of land and rule facilitated the expansion of territorial control by absorbing *muang* structures and leaders into the (seemingly) uniform grid of spatialized institutions. Forming an alliance with local

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

leaders, such as select members of the Cànm clan, carried great strategic weight during the war.<sup>216</sup> Co-opting the local *muang* spatial unit and its leadership spared time and effort. The emerging Ethnic Policy remained in effect: win over the upper classes—i.e. preserve their privileged positions—and recognize their traditional authority bureaucratically. Regionally specific orders on mass mobilization—i.e., “do not allow class struggle to evolve into disagreement between ethnicities”—allowed for wet-rice land to remain in Thái control.

If central and regional leaders intended the incorporation of local political and economic structures to facilitate the spatial expansion of national territorial rule, then this program gave rise to a number of unintended consequences as well. Perhaps most of all, one ethnically defined group assumed in the new regime a position of local rule once reserved for another ethnic and familial group in the old regime, i.e. the now discredited Đèo clan. If Central Government policy cast the Northwest Zone as an “ethnic place,” then the Thái enjoyed a privileged position within it. The multitude of other “ethnic” groups living on the slopes and mountains must have viewed the DRV’s preferential treatment of the valley-dwelling Thái with suspicion. For the multitude of highland Hmong, Dao, and other social groups, Thái rule of the Black River region continued much as before. Only this time the Thái were no longer supported by French empire but, instead, by a nation-state in the making. Indeed, there were uncanny parallels, and concrete relations, between emerging territorial and demographic majoritarianisms: between the Thái upstream in the Northwest Zone and the Kinh downstream in the Central Government. In this light, what was called “Thái-Kinh

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<sup>216</sup> McAlister writes that the “Viet Minh” gave pro-revolution “Black Thai” elites “guarantees” that their “traditional social hierarchy” would be preserved in order to enable “the Viet Minh...to aggregate political power without having to organize completely new structures at the local level” (1967), 812-813. Although I agree broadly, I disagree with the all encompassing label of “Viet Minh” and that the DRV planning somehow neglected to incorporate White Thái. I also find no evidence of “guarantees” and wonder how his reliance on French military sources can support this claim.

unity” in the mid 1940s foreshadowed the formation of a powerfully exclusive—and ultimately *dis*-unifying—political alliance.

Unintended consequences also compromised prominent items in the DRV agenda. Like the agricultural tax, recruitment for labor service suffered legitimation problems and fell prey to abuse. The DRV empowered local commune officials to recruit peasant labor to build roads and assist the military in the name of national citizenship duty. Yet the old guard’s continuing involvement in labor recruitment and allocation risked tainting citizenship duties (*dân công*) by associating it with a “feudal” Thái tradition (*cuông nhôc*) and its “exploitative” Federation variant (*bắt phu*). Accustomed to commanding bonded labor as lords in the Thái tradition, many new officials reproduced this tradition in new guise by manipulating the *dân công* program to funnel labor towards personal gain. Or they allowed family members to shirk their duties. Cầm clan and Party members alike drew on their new authority to avoid labor obligations, leaving poor families to pick up a disproportionate burden.<sup>217</sup>

Abuse of institutional powers and limited land reform also led to splits in supposedly unified entities. Official reports from the Northwest Zone in the 1950s are littered with descriptions of the “people”—i.e., the revolutionary peasantry—as “anxious” or “worried” (*thắc mắc*). Their expression of *thắc mắc* points to a feeling of deep unease concerning relations of power.<sup>218</sup> Poor peasants wondering about their place in the new regime must have felt great anxiety. Though problems related to class allegiance were a social cleavage in “Vietnam” as a whole, what is curious about the Northwest—something not lost on local observers—is their inversion. Whereas “mass mobilization” targeted bourgeois and landlord everywhere else, in the Northwest Zone

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<sup>217</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 9-10; ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 3; Duong Hồng Quang, “Việc...” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370, p. 7.

<sup>218</sup> Ninh (2002), 122-123.



these class and status factions enjoyed a renewed right to privilege, leaving poor peasants to toil and endure as usual. The rising tide of expectations generated by the promise of revolutionary social change stopped at the mountains.

This curious state of affairs threatened the anti-colonial resistance and revealed splits within “the state” itself. By late November 1953, poor peasants and local cadres alike greeted the “united ethnic front” with growing anger and frustration. Faced with an entrenched Thái elite who bent any attempt at agrarian reform to their advantage, Duong Hồng Quang described the land situation as, “very severe, and the people are very dissatisfied (*bất mãn*).” Frustrated in their attempts to “reform society,” Phù Yên’s district cadres vented “disagreement with the Central Government’s circumscribed policy of ‘mass mobilization.’” They offered a radical counter-proposal: “to carry out zealously the work of purging all unclean elements belonging to the upper class.”<sup>219</sup> That district cadres advocated violence against the Cầm clan—recognized Party members, military officers, and DRV officials—points to the tensions embedded in emerging relations of rule and the instability of “the state” as a mythically unified entity. Through 1953-54, the Center worked through the Northwest Party Committee as a moderating influence on the designs of such radical local cadres—and poor peasants—opposed to re-institutionalized traditional power. Such splits within “state” reveal the formation, if only temporary, of spatialized alliances belying any neat state-society divide: poor peasants allied with radical cadres; officialized local elites and regional cadres with central leaders.

If cleavages in the social hierarchy proved a potent source of division in this “ethnic area,” not all peasants responded according to class interests. Like the story of the lightning bolt at Mộc Châu, the persistence of popular traditions running counter to

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<sup>219</sup> The statement reads, “...tích cực tiến hành việc ‘thanh trừ các phần tử không trong sạch thuộc tầng lớp trên.’” The author quoted “thanh trừ” (to liquidate or purge), a term carrying violent potential. Duong Hồng Quang, “Việc...” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370, p. 7-8.

rational interests points to the limits of revolutionary logic. Power in Thái communities was diffuse and permeated everyday social life—at once outside of, yet still embedded within, positions of recognized authority and means of agrarian production. “The veneration of the masses regarding the house of Cầm,” stated Duong Hồng Quang, “is very clear in everyday activities.” In ritual activities such as harvest festivals, prayers, feasts, funerals, and any other routine “holidays,” Thái peasants all continued to grant the Cầm an elevated stature. Returning from exile to reclaim their hereditary positions, members of the Cầm clan likened their homecoming to a late blooming flower:

A lotus flower in a pond, for many years did not bloom,  
[but] this year it blossoms.  
Because the house of Cầm was dispersed the flower did not bloom,  
now they have returned and the lotus flower blossoms.

Duong Hồng Quang observed that many people believed this metaphor to be “true.” Similarly, peasants in Quang Huy interpreted the changing course of a stream (Suôi Tuc) to announce the failure of French military forces. “Everyone” believed that the French failure was linked causally to the house of Cầm’s ritual efforts to change this stream’s course.<sup>220</sup> Interpreting natural events as omens of social change points to an element of the Cầm clan’s power that perplexed cadres but swayed Thái peasants. Elite power extended beyond office and rice paddy to capture culturally-embedded meaning as well.

The elite’s ritual hold on meaning fed back into control over labor. The Cầm clan’s power to call on peasant service exceeded even that which their office extended them (a bureaucratic power which they also abused). Cầm Van Khoa returned from exile to find his home destroyed by warfare. Known locally as Lord Khoa, he said to

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<sup>220</sup> Duong Hồng Quang, “Việc...” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370, p. 6.

peasants, “Now I am weak and poor, so [I] must request that you help me carefully.” And many peasants, though hungry and in need of their own labor power, nonetheless felt such a mixture of “love” and “fear,” that they built him a new home “voluntarily.” Notwithstanding any anger expressed in private to cadres, even radicalized members of the peasantry fell silent in public settings attended by this senior member of the Cầm clan.<sup>221</sup> In spite of their best efforts to forbid such practices, local cadres could not stop them. Nor could they understand why a “liberated” peasantry continued to follow their former masters.

They did so only in part because of an old sense of loyalty based on *muang* traditions. Peasants continued to follow their old masters in another part because the new regime allowed these relationships to continue. If achieving the nation-state’s expansion into the Northwest required building as large a local coalition as possible, then assembling that coalition meant over-riding the revolution’s transformative agenda and leaving “feudal” relationships intact. Its status as an “ethnic minority area” meant that efforts to eliminate gender, class, and status based domination were, at least temporarily, suspended. The September proposal analyzed above is one of many decrees regarding the differential implementation of ostensibly national policy in this exceptional place. An October circular, for example, ordered the rectification of commune leadership along lines of appropriate class and gender composition but stipulated an important caveat. In “areas of many ethnicities,” commune committees must reflect “that ethnic situation” and waived class and gender considerations.<sup>222</sup>

DRV and Party policy re-inscribed markers of social difference by ascribing

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<sup>221</sup> Splits among an old elite and a radicalized peasantry had a generational dimension: while the elderly still venerated the Cầm, the youth “hated” them and spoke badly of them. Nonetheless, in meetings with Cầm clan members, pro-revolutionary youth, “did not dare to speak.” Duong Hồng Quang, “Việc...” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370, p. 7-8.

<sup>222</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Thông tư bổ khuyết Thông tư số 265-TTg về việc chỉnh đốn chính quyền cấp xã qua cuộc phát động quần chúng,” 4 Oct 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1376, p. 2.

“ethnicity” to specific locations in abstract national space. Mass Mobilization, Land Reform, and Ethnic Policy were of a piece with nationalizing space and re-making place. Together, such policy reproduced a binary set of markers, tying social categories to elevational gradients in imagined national space and concrete state territory. In the delta and plains, one’s class position and gender were salient and valid means of selection for political office; one’s Kinh identity merited no notice. In the mountains, one’s ethnic identity merited political consideration and, conversely, one’s class and gender position were overlooked. Ascribing social markers differentially in terms of national space were (and, in many ways, still are) part and parcel to powerful processes of state formation regulating place-based subject formation, resource control, and access to bureaucratic office.

Even if the postponement of agrarian reform was just that—i.e., temporary—then the association between ethnicity and the mountains was ultimately more lasting and consequential. Although this idea and practice had colonial roots, national rule embraced a spatialized ethnologic.<sup>223</sup> On multiple scales, ethnicity was always linked discursively to space and place, from generic terms like “ethnic minority area,” to select military zones and counties like “Hmong Zone 99,” to enormous official units, like the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone (created in 1955). Similarly, an emergent nation was linked to a bounded terrain, i.e. “Vietnam,” even if its final form was still a subject of dispute. In both cases, the emergent DRV drove to construct and consolidate abstract space, to remake it into bounded administrative place, and to set the terms for national inclusion and exclusion.

Underlying the war with France was a territorial imperative, to secure terrain within national boundaries and to institute a spatialized form of rule. To expand fully within its boundaries, pursuing the territorial imperative drove the DRV to incorporate

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<sup>223</sup> Moore calls a similar association in Zimbabwe the “ethnic spatial fix” (2005), 153-183.

an ethnic-place, a semi-separate frontier space produced in empire and ultimately reproduced in nation-state. What remained, in late 1953, was for the People's Army to embark on another military campaign to secure the Northwest Zone and, consequently, drive the French from DRV-claimed "Vietnam."

### ***The Battle of Điện Biên Phủ***

In the midst of DRV debates over how to conduct mass mobilization and land reform, the French military began preparations for what would become their decisive military showdown at Điện Biên Phủ. In autumn of 1953, the Central Government's leaders interrupted their debates by responding to the French plan with preparations for their own military campaign, forcing local cadres to refocus on the anti-colonial struggle. The DRV was about to embark on another push into the Black River region, using the People's Army to topple the Thái Federation and defeat the French military in an attempt to enforce its territorial claim fully and completely. The road to centralized power in Hanoi wound through the Black River's mountains and reached a crossing at the frontier post of Điện Biên Phủ.

French military and civilian leaders in the metropole were anxious to stem further losses in Indochina. Following the autumn 1952 Northwest Campaign and the April 1953 Lao Campaign, the People's Army had secured much of the Lao/Viet-Tonkin hinterland. In May 1953, the arrival in Hanoi of a new Commander in Chief, General Navarre, signaled the metropole's renewed commitment to Indochina's territory and prompted a reassessment of military strategy. After its acceptance by France's Joint Chiefs of Staff in July, what became known as the Navarre Plan outlined a military strategy to recover military initiative in Indochina in order to negotiate a political settlement with the DRV from a position of strength.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> Lockhart (1989), 254.

Following on the heels of ceasefire and partition on the Korean peninsula, Indochina had emerged as the next hot front in the Cold War. As a result, United States government aid to France grew substantially. The Eisenhower administration followed the Truman administration's precedent by supplying military hardware, transport, and funding in support of France's war there. Aside from military hardware provided through the Pentagon's Major Defense Acquisition Program (MDAP), US financial support for France's war effort steadily grew year by year in the early 1950s. By the fiscal year 1954, US contributions amounted to 78% of the war's total cost. The US offered Navarre's plan crucial financial and diplomatic support, underwriting his offensive with \$385 million.<sup>225</sup> As a result, for DRV leaders, the official "enemy" was changing again, appearing as an alliance between imperialist French and US powers. Likewise, the DRV's "friend" now included the People's Republic of China.

The Navarre Plan provided for the construction of an "air-land base" at Điện Biên Phủ where the French Expeditionary Forces intended to concentrate their strength. They hoped to lure the People's Army to this fortified "airhead" position (i.e., supplied and reinforced by aircraft) and launch a devastating counterattack. Confident in their ability to resupply this remote area by air, they did not imagine that the People's Army could do the same over land. French military strategists underestimated their adversary's capacity for fixed position warfare.<sup>226</sup>

In addition to protecting a gateway to Laos, General Navarre and his superiors miscalculated that building an entrenched camp at Điện Biên Phủ could build on local support for the Thái Federation.<sup>227</sup> Ironically, locating a large French base there

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<sup>225</sup> Kahin (1986), 36-44. Cf. Laurent Cesari, "The Declining Value of Indochina: France and the Politics of Empire, 1950-1955," in Lawrence and Logevall, eds. *The First Vietnam War* (2007), 177-178.

<sup>226</sup> Militarily, the design was modeled on the French experience at Nà Sản where they withstood encirclement by the People's Army for 9 months until departing by plane in August 1953. Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Điện Biên Phủ: Rendezvous with History* (Hanoi: Thế Giới Publishers, 2004b), 1-17.

<sup>227</sup> Fall (1967), 30-32.

actually undercut any of the Federation's remaining prestige. Military planners had forgotten to account for historic rivalries among two courts now coexisting, uneasily, as protectorates within a reconstructed French empire.<sup>228</sup> For Đèo Văn Long, protecting the Lao city of Luang Prabang at the expense of the soon-to-be abandoned town of Lai Châu subordinated his domain to French interests in Laos. In addition, many residents of Điện Biên were already distrustful of the Thái Federation and demonstrated support for the DRV.<sup>229</sup>

French military planning did not go unnoticed by leaders of an emergent Vietnam, who responded, in part, by adjusting their own plans for militarized territorial expansion. Chinese intelligence intercepted a copy of the Navarre Plan and sent it to officers in the People's Army in September 1953, enabling them to amend plans for the upcoming winter-spring offensive.<sup>230</sup> As autumn approached, soldiers and officers awaited marching orders and trained in attacking entrenched fortifications. In late September, General Giáp and his Chief of Staff Hoàng Văn Thái attended a meeting of the Politburo convened in the Việt Bắc to decide military strategy. With President Hồ Chí Minh acting as chair, the Politburo meeting was also attended by Deputy Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng, Party General Secretary Trường Chinh, and Lê Duẩn who led the VWP's southern branch. They decided to avoid a direct confrontation in areas of French military strength (i.e., the Red River Delta) and, instead, opted to launch spatially dispersed operations intended to compel French forces to spread thinly.<sup>231</sup> The resulting Winter-Spring Plan included opening another offensive directed towards the Northwest, which, at that point, was defended by only

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<sup>228</sup> I use the term "protectorate" loosely. Technically, according to the Bảo Đại solution of 1949, Laos and Vietnam were both recognized by France and the US as "independent" Associated States.

<sup>229</sup> McAlister (1967), 826-827.

<sup>230</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 13.

<sup>231</sup> At the VWP's 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum, Hồ had articulated this strategy as follows: "Avoid places of strength, strike places of weakness in order to spread the enemy forces, eliminate their vitality, and expand free areas." "Báo cáo..." 25 Jan 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 21.

2,000 soldiers in Lai Châu. They hoped to defeat the Thái Federation and to claim for “Vietnam” the entire northern border with China, from the eastern Việt Bắc stronghold westward through the Northwest Zone. By joining forces with Pathet Lao allies across the western border, the People’s Army intended to link this expanded area of military control with the territories of northeastern Laos it had already secured in April.<sup>232</sup>

The French military struck first at Điện Biên Phủ, precipitating the decline of the Thái Federation. On November 20<sup>th</sup> 1953, French paratroopers dropped from the sky and, over the next two days, reoccupied a valley lost to the People’s Army only a year earlier. They set about digging into the Mường Thanh plain, improving its airstrip, and transforming hilltop pastures and swiddens into garrisons ringed with barbed wire. On November 23<sup>rd</sup>, these paratroopers welcomed a unit of Thái partisans, commanded by Đèo Văn Long’s son in law, who had just withdrawn from Lai Châu. His withdrawal foreshadowed the final French abandonment of Lai Châu two weeks later. On December 8<sup>th</sup> the Thái Federation’s President, his family, and a troop of dancers left on a Boeing C-47 transport plane bound for Hanoi. Đèo Văn Long died in exile in France several years later.<sup>233</sup>

The French landing at Điện Biên Phủ signaled to General Giáp the beginning of the People’s Army’s own military campaign. On December 6, the Politburo approved the General Command’s Winter-Spring Plan.<sup>234</sup> Shortly thereafter, the main force once again crossed the Red River and headed back up and into the Black River region. The Điện Biên Phủ Campaign had begun. After securing Lai Châu in December, some People’s Army units launched a diversionary attack into Laos before regrouping and settling into siege positions surrounding French forces on the Mường

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<sup>232</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 20-24; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 285-288; Anon., “Đề nghị...” Sept 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1258, p. 1.

<sup>233</sup> Fall (1967), 19-20, 63.

<sup>234</sup> Cao Van Luong et al, eds. (2003), 432; Hồ Chí Minh, *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập* vol 7 (1995), p. 597.



Thanh plain. And then they all dug in.

During the lengthy preparation for fixed position combat, General Giap had time both to settle into his bunker in Mường Phăng, situated in the mountains above the plain, and to solidify local alliances. In early February, he and his fellow officers in the Front Command celebrated the Lunar New Year (*Tết*) with two key allies. Wei Quoging of the Chinese Military Advisory Team offered to share documents from the People's Liberation Army on lessons they had gleaned from Korea on tactics for siege warfare. And, in addition to expressing their New Year's wishes, Lò Văn Hạc led a delegation of Thái, Hmong, and Dao "compatriots" who expressed their resolve to fight alongside the People's Army.<sup>235</sup>

Full-scale combat did not begin until 13 March 1954. Total French forces, including reinforcements, amounted to some 15,000 troops.<sup>236</sup> They confronted an estimated 50,000 combatants from the People's Army.<sup>237</sup> Combat ended on May 7<sup>th</sup> in victory for the People's Army.

### ***Reorienting Center and Frontier***

Nationalist and official narratives of Điện Biên Phủ build irrevocably towards the battle's outcome and then use the "great victory" there to interpret the region's prior history anachronistically.<sup>238</sup> More broadly, scholarly histories periodize Vietnam's history by using the battle's conclusion in 1954 to posit an end and a beginning.<sup>239</sup> In other words, simple stories of Vietnam's rupture with French

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<sup>235</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 136-137.

<sup>236</sup> Fall (1967), 479-482. Note these troops represented the French empire concretely, coming from France, downstream Tonkin and Annam, North Africa, and the Thái Federation.

<sup>237</sup> This figure includes neither an estimated 6,000 logistics personnel (army engineers, *dân công* porters), youth group volunteers (*thanh niên xung phong*), medical staff nor an additional 23,000 troops protecting supply lines. Cf., Fall (1967), 479-482; Cao Van Luong et al, eds. (2003), 436.

<sup>238</sup> Cf., Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm (1979).

<sup>239</sup> Notable exceptions include Pelley (2002); Ninh (2002); Bradley (2009).

colonialism mask complex tales of conflict and boundary-making among socially diverse and politically wayward peoples. This historiographic tendency merits a revision.

The People's Army's triumph at Điện Biên Phủ was made possible only by defeating the Thái Federation's rival claim to territory and by enlisting Lai Châu's population as national subjects and peasant laborers willing to supply a military and construct a state. Viewed locally, the capture of Lai Châu meant its people labored to support the People's Army at Mường Thanh. The Thái Federation's collapse meant there was no longer a local, viable alternative to hegemonic rule under the DRV. It is worth pausing in this moment of transition to analyze how a rising state attempted to justify powerful claims with regards to its own legitimacy, as "state," and to recruit Lai Châu's people by casting them as members of an imagined community, as "nation." Militarized territorial expansion linked these two processes together, contributing to an unsteady union between state and nation, or the country of "Vietnam."

What form of rule would replace the Thái Federation? How were existing political relations transformed under the new regime? Based on the discussion above, one might surmise that autonomy appeared to be the answer. By the time the People's Army stormed Lai Châu in December 1953, almost two years had elapsed since Party Secretary Trường Chinh had recognized a right to autonomy yet chose to delay it; almost one year since President Hồ Chí Minh's stated it time to grant self-rule; and six months since Vice President Phạm Văn Đồng modified their divergent opinions and codified the DRV's Ethnic Policy. Yet a public bulletin posted by the DRV in Lai Châu on 22 December makes no mention of autonomy.

Written in Romanized Vietnamese (*quốc ngữ*) and accompanied by a translation in White Thái language script, the "Appeal by the Resistance and

Administrative Committee of Lai Châu Province” appears similar to the bulletin posted on Sơn La’s “liberation” 14 months earlier.<sup>240</sup> Both documents draw on the authority of President Hồ Chí Minh, the Government, and the military. Both are signed by the respective Chairman of each provincial Resistance and Administrative Committee. Whereas Sơn La’s Bulletin was signed by a critic of the Thái Federation and early supporter of the August Revolution, Xa Văn Minh, Lai Châu’s Appeal marked the return of a prodigal son, Lò Văn Hặc.

If these emergent governing structures in Sơn La and Lai Châu belonged to the DRV, so did the leader of each come from old Thái ruling families. Regardless of one’s class-based or ethnic identification, the local population must have recognized the significance of some Thái men rising at the expense of others. Far from a revolutionary rupture, in fact, it must have appeared to members of local Khumu, Hmong, or other marginalized groups that Thái elites remained the externally-supported and militarily-protected sovereigns of their highland domain. Substitution, incorporation, and domination were social processes all part and parcel to making relations of state and expanding its territorial domain. For the many non-Thái social groups and poor Thái peasants who lived and farmed much as before, local rule persisted according to patterns of spatially-specific social relations predicated on the *muang* and its domination by a hereditary elite.

Although incorporating an old elite into new state structures implies continuity, radical change underlay how new rulers represented themselves and relations with their ostensible subjects. The Appeal’s ambitious text encapsulates a revolutionary logic that proposed to re-order collective senses of community, time, and space. And this re-ordering of fundamental social, temporal, and spatial moorings

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<sup>240</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, Chủ tịch UBHC tỉnh Lai Châu, “Hiệu triệu của Ủy ban kháng chiến Hành chính tỉnh Lai Châu,” 22 Dec 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1258; Sa Văn Minh, “Thông cáo...” 16 Oct 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306.

was not without purpose: it was meant to galvanize popular support for the DRV's military ambitions. At this conjuncture in the anti-colonial war, the Appeal articulated a logic through which rising political and military leaders staked a claim on scarce agrarian resources. This revolutionary logic had been tested and improved in other contexts within the evolving boundaries of "Vietnam," such as neighboring Son La. For the audience in Lai Châu, this logic was novel, perhaps even moving.

The Appeal's opening lines conjured a revolutionary alliance. Like a letter, the Appeal begins by addressing a specific audience: to "compatriots from the province," to "brother and sister *dân công*," and to "all officers, soldiers, and militiamen within the province." Note that people *from* the province, the "compatriots," retained an ethnicized moniker while itinerant *dân công*—or conscripted laborers—were cast as family members. Within this paper alliance, only the official agents of state, i.e. the military, gained inclusion without some marker of difference.

Next, the Appeal deployed an inclusive term of address to bind its audience to a new community—the nation. "For over 80 years," reads its first line, "the French bandits and gang of puppet traitors has exploited our people..." Immediately, any differences between the three addressed social groups dissolved and reformed under the banner of "our people" (*nhân dân ta*). The "people," as Trường Chinh defined, were actors who were—or, rather, could become—revolutionary partisans; this was their intended social function.<sup>241</sup> More subtle was the use of the particle *ta*—meaning, "we" or "our" or "us"—that, at once, rendered a collectivity into being.<sup>242</sup> It was a collectivity predicated on national community and, hence, worked dialectically to include some and exclude others. Excluded were the French and the "traitorous"

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<sup>241</sup> "Hoàn thành..." *Văn kiện Đảng*, vol 12, yr 1951 (2001), 76-83.

<sup>242</sup> The Vietnamese language distinguishes between a third person plural inclusive (*chúng ta*) and exclusive (*chúng tôi*). The national "we" (*ta*) was and is always the inclusive, discursively binding the interlocutor to a larger audience. Note how this "national we," so common in nationalist scholarship, compares with "state we," so common in archived reports, discussed earlier.

members of the Đèo clan (or other compradors), any remnants of which were recast as “bandits” (*phi*) to be “wiped out.” Included were these revolutionary partisans. Yet the terms of inclusion were—and would remain—problematic: the ethnicized “compatriots” as somehow other and, according to evolving DRV policy, numerically and culturally inferior “ethnic minorities”; the *dân công* as junior family members, or common laborers, within a metaphorical national household.<sup>243</sup>

If the Appeal worked to institutionalize relations of rule (i.e., state) and to legitimize them in terms of community membership (i.e., nation), then it also worked to establish new conceptions of time. Determining when exactly the national “we” expanded to include Lai Châu reveals an equally important and, likewise, problematic sense of chronology. As indicated in the opening line, “For over 80 years...,” the Appeal recast local history according to a new extra-local periodicity, one that began with French conquest of Vietnam’s northern salient (*Bắc bộ* or Tonkin). The Appeal pointed an accusatory finger directly at the Đèo clan and the French for perpetrating an unjust, exploitative system of rule. This indictment marks a crucial departure from the bulletin posted in Sơn La which, notably, had glossed over the Thái Federation to accuse some vaguely conceived “Western bandits.” Evidently, with Đèo Văn Long and the Thái Federation toppled, the enemy’s local face could be revealed—if only to berate and condemn. According to this new story of the past, it was within the period of colonial rule that the “we” first appears, as in “The French bandits divided *us*...”; how the “yoke” of unjust rule made “the people of *our* province” suffer.<sup>244</sup> So the “we” worked to capture the (loyal) people of Lai Châu retroactively, reaching into a new vision of the past to include them—and exclude their enemies—in a version of the present.

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<sup>243</sup> The household motif is a pervasive metaphor for national belonging, as illustrated in the use of the “homeland” (*tổ quốc*) in its literal and figurative sense.

<sup>244</sup> Italics added.

This is history in service to the present. Indeed, for the authors of this appeal, the danger posed by a renewed French force in late 1953 required enlisting “the people” to perform arduous, dangerous work. How did they solicit them? Or, how did a powerful institutional coalition bound to hereditary elites legitimize claims on agrarian resources? By pointing to accomplishments achieved in neighboring Sơn La since 1952—redistribution of official land, “freedom to make a living,” government assistance—they offered a vision of a brighter future to Lai Châu. And this future would begin with the proclaimed end of colonial rule, with the “total liberation” of “our cherished province.” To escape past exploitation and to achieve future freedom, the new government called on Lai Châu’s people to accept and perform duties in the present. This emphasis on future gains in exchange for enduring present difficulties cuts to the quick of what was, after all, an *appeal*, a document intended to enlist support for “our President, Government, military”—in short, to create and sustain a national state with teeth.

Accepting the authority of “our” state structure meant, also, acknowledging its spatially re-oriented relations of rule. Lai Châu’s population and territorial expanse were no longer subject to the Thái Federation, no longer part of French empire. Rather, should its readers act on the Appeal, they joined a national liberation movement directed by a new center, organized as state according to a hierarchy of territorialized institutions. Should they not be persuaded by the appeal’s revolutionary logic, then the suddenly ubiquitous People’s Army backed it with force. Either way, the confederated villages (*bản muang*) remained in place but their spatial position within larger relations of state and interstate rule shifted inexorably. Lai Châu was no longer the seat of a semi-autonomous unit of French empire headed by a local ruler. Rather, Lai Châu town was district capital (*thị xã*) of Mường Lay and its surrounding area a provincial unit within DRV territorial administration, both refigured as part of a

newly consecrated state space known as “Northwest” Vietnam.<sup>245</sup>

Of course, not everyone did submit to DRV rule. For the Thái elite, historic loyalties to DRV or Federation rule led to career advancement or to death or displacement, respectively. Over the next several decades, Xa Văn Minh and Lò Văn Hắc rose upwards in the DRV’s bureaucratic ranks, achieving leadership positions in the Autonomous Zone, reaching even the National Assembly. Yet their upward mobility pales in comparison to the outward trajectories of their deposed rivals.

Many supporters of the Federation and French in Sơn La fled in the wake of the Northwest Campaign. When the French evacuated the stronghold of Nà Sản on 11 August 1953, along with 4,750 military personnel including two Thái battalions, they airlifted out 1,500 Thái peasants as well.<sup>246</sup> After a route that wound through Laos, the Thái Federation’s head of Sơn La Province, Bạc Cầm Quý, wound up in Iowa.<sup>247</sup>

In areas “liberated” during the Lai Châu and Điện Biên Phủ Campaigns, the Đèo clan either fled or faced retribution in place. Đèo Văn Long, the Federation’s ousted President, fled with his retinue to the colonial metropole.<sup>248</sup> Members of his family who remained faced terrible consequences, such as his son Đèo Văn Ún who was captured following the battle’s conclusion. After enduring a public trial, he was executed by firing squad on 10 June 1954 near his former office in Điện Biên Phủ.<sup>249</sup>

For the common folk of the new Northwest, be they Thái, Hmong, Khumu,

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<sup>245</sup> Lai Châu Province, like Sơn La, disappeared from the administrative divisions of the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone (1955-62) and then reappeared in the Northwest Autonomous Zone (1962-75).

<sup>246</sup> Fall (1967), 24, 34; Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 6.

<sup>247</sup> He fled to Laos in 1952 with a group of followers and remained there for twenty years before the Pathet Lao’s victory set them in motion once again. From refugee camps in Thailand, in 1975, they eventually found refuge in the wings of the DRV’s larger enemy, the United States. Settling in Iowa, Bạc Cầm Quý declared Des Moines to be, “the free capital of the Thaidam [Black Thái] people.” Dinh Van Lo, “Who Are The Thaidam?” *The Channel*, Fall (1998). Accessed online 8 May 2008 at: <<http://eden.clmer.csulb.edu/netshare/kclam/APA/NAF98.htm#Thaidam>>.

<sup>248</sup> Philippe Le Failler, *La Rivière Noire: L’histoire d’une March Frontière* (March 2010, draft manuscript), 288.

<sup>249</sup> Công an tỉnh Lai Châu, *Lịch sử Công an Nhân dân huyện Điện Biên, 1952-1975* (Hanoi: NXB Công an Nhân dân, 1994), 34-35.

etc., the new regime brought change as well as continuity in their daily lives and in their relationships to emerging institutional power. Some refused to accept DRV rule and took advantage of territorial sovereignty's limits by crossing a border, escaping to Laos or China. But most stayed behind, to become agents caught up in the process of this centralizing power's militarized legitimation and territorialization. The next two chapters deal with their lot in more detail.



## CHAPTER 5

### MILITARIZATION, LIBERATION, AND THE POLITICS OF CALCULATION

#### ***Introduction: theory, method, and militarizing spaces***

##### *Theoretical touchstones*

This chapter and the next explore the making of an economy during a time, and for the purposes, of war. I begin with Timothy Mitchell's argument that the economy was, and is, a "set of practices that puts in place a new politics of calculation."<sup>1</sup> The economy's distinguishing feature, its "character of calculability," signaled the emergence of new relations between people and people, people and things. Realized and recognized in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a realm in and of itself, the economy was a result of social processes both real and abstract, material and cultural—all of which in Egypt, as in Vietnam, emerge from a longer history of colonialism.<sup>2</sup>

Discussing militarization and liberation in the Black River region in 1952-54 serves to apply and enrich arguments about a politics of calculation. When the People's Army conquered much of the Black River region in late 1952, an emerging political elite deployed the idea of "liberation" (*giải phóng*) to make a dialectical claim both to the legitimacy of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and to the illegitimacy of French colonial and Thái Federation rule. Liberation also figured in the categorization of the DRV's "recently liberated" and "temporarily occupied" (i.e., not yet "liberated") territory. Here, I expand on the idea of liberation to assess a popular response to military conquest and to an underlying project enabling more military conquest. What I call the liberation effect among an emerging community moved

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*... 80-83. Here, Mitchell borrows from Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life," In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Free Press, 1950).

through a series of moments—from enthusiasm for possibility to anxiety about its limits—as the project to enumerate, calculate, and claim this community’s productive capacity grew in scale and intensified in scope. “Liberating” a population meant, also, subjecting them to state claims on labor and agrarian produce.

The ambivalence that greeted liberation unfolded during, and was inseparable from, the making and remaking of social relations in support of militarized state-making. “Militarization,” writes Michael Geyer, “is the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence.”<sup>3</sup>

Although Geyer’s definition locates its origins in “civil society,” he describes how militarization blurs any boundaries between forms of civil and military organization.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, militarization is tense precisely because the process exposes and engenders conflict among and between ostensibly unified entities such as “state” and “society.”<sup>5</sup>

Underlying this tension are two contradictory social processes. First, militarization involves the simultaneous production and destruction of things both social (persons, formations, values, relations) and material (land and goods). Second, centralization of power among a rising elite accompanied increasing socialization of their political project. Geyer identifies the “site of twentieth century processes of militarization” as the “rearrangement of the triangular relations between mass participation, institutional domination, and elite formation.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, as mass participation increased in politics, so too did institutional-professional domination rise with elite capacity to

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Geyer, “The Militarization of Europe, 1915-1945,” pp. 65-102 in *The Militarization of the Western World*, ed. John Gillis (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 79. Geyer’s work has inspired like-minded authors, such as Michael Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States in the 1950s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Geyer (1989), 70. For more on the difficulties of locating civil society, cf., Shelley Feldman, “NGOs and Civil Society: (Un)stated Contradictions,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 554 (1997), 46-65.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and their Critics,” *American Political Science Review* 85 (1991): 77-96; Catherine Lutz, “Making War at Home in the United States: Militarization and the Current Crisis,” *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002), 725-726.

<sup>6</sup> Geyer (1989), 76.

centralize their power. Not all participation was voluntary nor did the masses always work as intended: “these were always,” observes Geyer, “embattled processes.”<sup>7</sup> Here, I use militarization to describe tense and contradictory social processes whereby an emerging elite attempted to reorganize social relations of subjecthood, production, and exchange nationally in order to serve a coercive project of consolidating and expanding state territory. In short, militarized state-making was a political project with economic dimensions and profound social consequences.

Analyzing how an economy was unmade, made, and remade in relation to processes of militarization and “liberation” enriches this study theoretically and historically. Just as Mitchell describes how realizing an economy enabled practices of development and government, Shelley Feldman calls for rethinking development and government in relation to militarization.<sup>8</sup> Feldman argues that state-organized violence not only constitutes politics but also enables forms of development intervention.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, “development” (*sự phát triển*) emerged historically as a political and economic agenda for the “Northwest” in the wake of its military conquest. At once an ideological and material project, the DRV development agenda aimed to increase production in order to allocate more agrarian resources to drive more military conquest. Like militarization, development among a “liberated” population was tense and contradictory: just as cadres attempted to increase production and reorient exchange, so too did popular hunger rise as cause and effect of agrarian interventions. If the technical project of development was predicated on linear improvement, then the inherent cyclicity of agriculture and accompanying seasonal food shortage revealed its limits.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding state efforts to manage relations of production and

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell (2002), 83.

<sup>9</sup> Shelley Feldman, “Social Regulation in a Time of War,” *Globalizations* 4 (2007), 446.

<sup>10</sup> On developmentalist linearity, cf., Tania Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); on agrarian cyclicity, cf., A.V.

exchange rationally, increasing claims on agrarian resources exposed an underlying contradiction: diverting scarce resources away from peasant producers and to military consumers unintentionally decreased the peasantry's ability to reproduce socially.

In addition to responding to current scholarly debates and concerns, this study of making an economy draws on ideas and concepts from an earlier generation of sociologists. When I speak of labor and commodities, I use these terms in appreciation of Karl Marx's work to demystify their representation. Labor is at once an abstraction and a real, historically concrete category.<sup>11</sup> As such, I investigate the project of making labor, of how different persons became abstracted, enumerated, and represented as "people's laborers" (*dân công*). Making labor increased mass political participation through coercion and consent, violence and legitimation. Hunger exposed the limits of legitimation, both revealing *and* stimulating violent practices compelling people to become laborer-producers on behalf of an elite political project. Marx notes as well that the commodity form always conceals and reveals forms of value.<sup>12</sup> Salt, for example, was distributed by the DRV both to provide nutrition to a desperate population (i.e., use value) and to legitimize relations of rule (i.e., exchange value). Salt figured in emergent, state-regulated relations of exchange for locally produced agricultural goods such as rice and non-timber forest products which, in turn, made their way towards financing war and feeding soldiers. Contemporaneously in state reports and, later, in commemorative histories, official acts of recounting "contributions" to the war effort work to abstract living, breathing people as labor and socially necessary food as provisions. As C. Wright Mills noted only two years after

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Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. Daniel Thorner et al (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1973), 105. For commentary on Marx's ideas of real and concrete, cf., Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. xii, 58-62.

<sup>12</sup> Marx, *Capital*, ed. Friedrich Engels (New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1984), 13-37.

the battle at Điện Biên Phủ, such (mis)representations amount to mystification, what he called a “military definition of reality.”<sup>13</sup>

Narrative recounting is predicated on prior acts of counting and accounting. When I speak of rationalization, I draw on Max Weber’s work on the use and emergence of calculation and measurement as hallmarks of bureaucratic domination.<sup>14</sup> As discussed previously, bureaucratic domination did not displace traditional domination in the DRV’s emerging Northwest region but, rather, merged in a powerful hybrid form to produce and rearrange relations between regional, local, and central elites. Nonetheless, rationalization of authority and economic action continued apace, working to centralize economic and political decision-making. State Shops formed the vanguard of a planned economy by selling consumption and capital goods, buying local agrarian produce, and circulating DRV currency.<sup>15</sup> Even if planning and management often went awry in practice, the State Shops set prices and rules for trade, deciding what was lawful and unlawful exchange. The police enforced their rules and decisions. Furthermore, amidst intense legitimation work, the DRV drew on its emergent authority, and increased its capacity, to stake claims on agrarian resources by recruiting civilian labor and levying agricultural taxes.<sup>16</sup> By issuing codes and regulations, central and regional political elites legitimized claims as efficient, appropriate, and equitable; and their fulfillment as prerequisites for national citizenship. Even if claim-making often worked inequitably, cadres and planners developed efficient bureaucratic means of counting and accounting for labor and grains. In short, they contributed towards making society calculable, legible, and

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<sup>13</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 183-186.

<sup>14</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 952-954.

<sup>15</sup> Weber (1978), 109-113.

<sup>16</sup> Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 248-249.

abstract.<sup>17</sup> Through successive iterations of recruiting labor and taxation, they learned of the population, increased the efficiency of collection and, in so doing, intensified the claim-making process.

Counting, accounting, and recounting unfolded within heavily contested, multiply claimed territory. The DRV's capacity to levy claims on real or potential subjects was contingent on its military's ability to secure a territorial claim: as the People's Army expanded state territory, the process of making claims on its population also expanded and, over time, intensified.<sup>18</sup> These reciprocal and iterative processes accelerated when the People's Army defeated French garrisons on the northern border in late 1950 and, shortly thereafter, the People's Republic of China granted diplomatic recognition to a reorganized DRV led by the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP). Opening a passage for aid and earning diplomatic relations enabled the People's Army to escalate armed confrontation. As the war expanded spatially and the People's Army grew numerically, the DRV endeavored to extract resources latent in the masses to meet military logistical requirements. "The primary nexus between the DRV and the population during the resistance," writes Gareth Porter, "was the mobilization of foodstuffs and labor to support its constantly growing army."<sup>19</sup> Enforcing a sovereign territorial claim, then, relied not only on the military's ability to fight but also on the government's ability to claim and collect resources from real or potential subject populations.

Just as the nationalization of space preceded and legitimized military

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<sup>17</sup> James Scott, *Seeing like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Amir Weiner, Introduction, in Weiner, ed., *Landscaping the Human Garden* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 2-3.

<sup>18</sup> As Charles Tilly notes, "war made states and vice versa." *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), esp. 67-76. Cf., James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 146-150.

<sup>19</sup> Gareth Porter, *Vietnam: The Politics of Bureaucratic Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 18-19.

enforcement of a territorial claim, so did the nationalization of subject populations precede and legitimize recruitment of labor for, and on behalf of, a military. The DRV's 1946 Constitution obliged citizens to perform military service.<sup>20</sup> Because scholars have amply documented formal soldiering duties in the People's Army elsewhere, I focus instead on an understudied form of civilian "people's laborers" (*dân công*) whose service was similarly legitimized in terms of national citizenship.<sup>21</sup> Being a civilian noncombatant demanded duties and labors as necessary, onerous, and dangerous as soldiering itself.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it was noncombatant labor service that most directly involved Black River peoples, whose sense of national community in 1952-54 (and beyond) was very much in the making. "The process of militarization," Geyer observes, "compresses processes of community and nation-building under dictates of scarcity."<sup>23</sup> Although his idea of compression is significant and his emphasis on scarcity crucial, I make a fine distinction by focusing on processes of state-making. Given that the notion of a Vietnamese nation was carried by cadres and soldiers promising "liberation" to, for, and of Black River populations, I argue that militarization compressed processes of remaking relations of rule, production, and exchange—all of which were legitimated with reference to national community.

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<sup>20</sup> "Công dân Việt Nam có nghĩa vụ phải đi lính," or literally, "citizens of Vietnam have an obligation to go soldiering." *Hiến pháp nước Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hoà 1946*, 9 Nov 1946, Chương II, điều thứ 5. Accessed 2 August 2010 at: <[http://vi.wikisource.org/wiki/Wikisource:Văn\\_kiến\\_lập\\_hiến](http://vi.wikisource.org/wiki/Wikisource:Văn_kiến_lập_hiến)>.

<sup>21</sup> With regards to formal soldiering, the DRV declared on 4 Nov 1949 a general mobilization applicable to all men and women in "free zones" over the age of 18 years. On 15 Apr 1950, the general mobilization expanded to include "enemy occupied areas" and mandated punishments for evasion, simultaneously reflecting and enabling the war's escalation. Bernard Fall, *The Viet Minh Regime* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1956), 83-85; Lockhart (1989), 224.

<sup>22</sup> Scott observes of this region during an earlier era: "Warfare for civilian noncombatants, especially those on the route of march, was, if anything, more devastating than for conscripts" (2009), 146.

<sup>23</sup> Geyer (1989), 79.

### *Methodological perspectives*

This chapter and the next draw on and elaborate these theoretical arguments based on an observed empirical shift. I divide these chapters in order to highlight two overlapping moments of militarization when, in late 1953, claim-making practices shifted from an emphasis on reciprocal exchange to intensified social mobilization. Reciprocal exchange generated local resources through a voluntaristic trade in goods and ideas predicated on an idea of state as benevolent and helpful. Mobilization generated resources through less voluntaristic, more coercive modes predicated on emergent institutional capacities and the simultaneous construction of state as a “higher” authority. The shift was not complete and the two practices were related. Even after mobilization became dominant in late 1953, reciprocal exchange continued; exchange also conditioned mobilization’s emergence by forming relations between cadres and local elites in late 1952 and early 1953.

In spite of their temporal overlap, the empirical shift between modes of claim-making in late 1953 illustrates a qualitative change and quantitative increase in intensity and scale. Some rough numerical estimates place the shift in perspective. The population of the entire Northwest Zone in the early 1950s was 300,000 residents. The Northwest Military Campaign in November-December 1952 lasted two and a half months, involved 35,000 People’s Army soldiers, and relied on 70,000 *dân công* laborers, of whom 9,000 came from the Northwest Zone itself. By contrast, the Điện Biên Phủ Military Campaign lasted, officially, from November 1953 to May 1954, involved 50,000 People’s Army troops, and relied on 260,000 *dân công* laborers, of whom 30,000 came from the Zone itself. Compared with the Northwest Campaign, the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign lasted four times longer, involved 50% more troops, and relied on five times as many laborers, of whom three times as many were local. I discuss these figures, their origins, and their making in these two chapters—as well as



their social consequences.

In order to analyze this empirical shift and its theoretical implications, I use a comparative historical approach. Methodologically, I incorporate comparisons by attending to multiple and malleable social formations, what Philip McMichael calls “parts and wholes,” evolving in relation to one another historically and spatially.<sup>24</sup> Concretely, I reference three social formations in relation to the Black River region: emerging national community, an associated land reform agenda, and its limited local implementation (discussed in Chapter 4); earlier, but disrupted, revolutionary organizing in 1948-50 (Chapter 3); historically deeper, still ongoing, and enmeshed *muang*-based, colonial, and Thái Federation rule (Chapter 2). Here, in Chapter 5, I incorporate multiple comparisons into analysis of emergent DRV-regulated relations of exchange and production in 1952-53. I continue this discussion in Chapter 6 with respect to large scale social mobilization in 1953-54.

Beginning in the late 1940s, cadres strove to make relations of production a point of contest and, then, to remake them in support of the revolutionary cause. Wary of reproducing the Thái Federation’s unpopular tax and corvée regime, the Son-Lai Committee in 1948-50 attempted to reduce cadre and guerilla demands on the local population and, instead, imported commodities (especially salt) to alleviate conditions of scarcity and build legitimacy. Out of these early encounters emerged what I called a revolutionary exchange in which cadres and guerillas supplied scarce goods and, in turn, demanded local agricultural produce and peasant labor. Through this exchange, this movement of goods and ideas, emerged a nascent community, one that, over time, cadres would harness to a nation in the making. The exchange was material and symbolic or, in short, eminently social.

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<sup>24</sup> Philip McMichael, “Incorporating Comparison within a World-Historical Perspective: An Alternative Comparative Method,” *American Sociological Review* 55 (1990), 386.

When the first cadres arrived in the late 1940s and returned in late 1952, their claims on agrarian resources were made in explicit comparison with those levied by the Thái Federation which, in turn, held to longer traditions. In the Black River region generally, as with much of montane Southeast Asia, labor had historically been in short supply.<sup>25</sup> Thái lords of scattered and confederated *muang* domains used a system of bonded labor (*cuông nhuôt*) in an attempt to fix a supply of manpower to grow wet-rice. Recognized as officials by the colonial regime and, in 1948, by the Thái Federation, Thái lords gained bureaucratic power to recruit corvée and formalize taxation. For some Thái subjects and many highland communities (such as Dao and Hmong peoples), swidden cultivation presented an alternative and maximized returns to scarce labor resources.<sup>26</sup> Although highland groups avoided bonded and corvée labor, the Federation did tax their agricultural produce, especially opium.

In late 1952, the People's Army initially relied on imported labor and supplies from downstream to feed and move its soldiers. During and after the Northwest Campaign, regional leaders attempted to restart reciprocal exchange (what I called the revolutionary exchange in Chapter 3) by supplying scarce commodities in exchange for loyalty, labor, and rice. In addition, they initiated a “development” program to begin transforming the means of production and to increase output. In contrast to comprehensive land reform conducted elsewhere in an emerging Vietnam, central DRV and Northwest regional leaders—much to the chagrin of radical cadres and radicalized poor Thái peasants—settled on this more modest agenda. Meanwhile, a new program to mobilize resources in support of militarized state-making began to

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<sup>25</sup> Scott (2009), 41-42.

<sup>26</sup> For Scott, swidden is a means of evading state labor claims, or “escape agriculture” (2009), 181-182. Literature on shifting cultivation in Southeast Asia demonstrates its suitability to hilly, seasonally dry terrain and its high returns to labor (rather than land). Cf., Harold C. Conklin, *Hanunoo Agriculture* (Rome: FAO, 1957) for a classic account from the Philippines; Michael Dove, *Swidden Agriculture in Indonesia* (New York: Mouton, 1985) for an argument about the practice's high labor returns.

unfold and picked up pace over 1953. It was during and after the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign when mobilization emerged as state practice and complex social process, becoming an everyday form of state formation intended to reallocate agrarian resources to militarized state-making.

As such, agents of colonial and revolutionary political projects alike staked claims to agrarian labor and produce. If both claimed labor, what differed was their relation to the means of production and, consequently, how they legitimized their claims. Whereas the French colonial state and the Thái Federation claimed the fruits of agricultural production (i.e., ends), these regimes were less concerned with how fruits were produced (i.e., means). The emerging DRV demanded a share of these same products and was very concerned with *how* they were cultivated and distributed. Even though the agrarian reform agenda was relatively limited, DRV and Party leaders determined to transform the means of production through time discipline, labor reorganization, agricultural extension, etc. As Feldman reminds us, development interventions must be seen in the context of their emergence.<sup>27</sup> In the early 1950s Black River region, stated efforts to “improve rural society” appeared in war and intended to enable its conduct. In spite of efforts to defuse a trade-off between keeping resources on-farm or moving them off-farm, doing both posed a potential contradiction, one that became real and concrete in mid-1953 during conditions of hunger and starvation.

What had changed by 1953 was the capacity of multiple local communities of swidden and wet-rice farmers to bear what had become an overwhelming emphasis on military struggle. Provisioning was no longer a matter of immediate community as it had been in 1948-50, of sharing what meager supplies were available to cultivators with members of an armed propaganda team. In the interval of 1950-52, an emerging

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<sup>27</sup> Feldman (2007), 449, 452.

political elite—the DRV’s enmeshed Party, state, military leadership—reorganized institutions and reoriented the “national” economy towards making war. The Northwest Campaign signaled that the military had become a regular fighting force of tens of thousands, their activities now routinized, disciplined, and apparently separate from “the people,” yet demanding much more of their labor and agrarian produce.<sup>28</sup> Informal exchange relations predicated on shared struggle, i.e. the revolutionary exchange of 1948-50, were no longer sufficient to meet demands organized by state and allocated to military consumption. Cadres, as socially recognized representatives of “state,” appeared in village settings to mediate evolving and embedded realms of state and economy, military and society. In the newly consecrated and forcibly acquired Northwest Zone, monitoring, stabilizing, and boosting output to meet targets for military demands overshadowed radical land reform. Yet contextually-specific conditions of scarce labor, land, and capital limited any potential agrarian surplus. In concert with ongoing institutional reorganization and centralization, reciprocal exchange relations began in 1953 to yield to a rationalizing and intensifying program of mobilization. Chapters 5 and 6 analyze two iterations of militarized claim-making as well as their social consequences and spatial dimensions.

*Militarizing spaces: rear, front, frontier*

The year 1953 figured as a time of preparation and increasing labor recruitment, particularly with regards to building roads and other transportation infrastructure.<sup>29</sup> In addition to contributing towards the making of an economy,

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<sup>28</sup> Mitchell (1991), 92.

<sup>29</sup> Cf., Trường Chinh, “Chỉ thị của Ban bí thư về việc lãnh đạo công tác làm cầu đường giao thông vận tải,” 15 June 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2001), 243-45; Đảng ủy Quân sự Trung ương, “Báo cáo của Tổng Quân ủy về tình hình Quân sự sáu tháng đầu năm 1953,” 27 June 1953, in *Một số văn kiện chỉ đạo chiến cuộc đông xuân 1953-1954 và chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 2004), 32-35.

wartime infrastructure work had long term consequences for binding the Black River region to an emergent Vietnam. At the time, recruiting labor for doing so was a contested project with unintended outcomes. Logistics is a seemingly neutral military-technocratic term that tends to gloss these struggles and their consequences. For example, a volume published by the Ministry of Defense in 2004 to commemorate the battle of Điện Biên Phủ's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary recounts all this preparatory work as “securing logistics.”<sup>30</sup> Although issued by the Ministry's General Department of Logistics, this same institution was known half a century ago as the military's General Department of Supply (*Tổng cục Cung cấp*) which worked closely with the civilian Council on Front Supply (*Hội đồng Cung cấp Mặt Trận*). I call attention here to the idea of logistics, or military supply, with reference to emergent spatial categories of front, rear, and frontier.

In Vietnamese, as in other languages, “rear” is always understood in relation to “front.” During this round of conflict and others subsequently, military operations conducted on the front (*mặt trận* or *tiền tuyến*) drew on and reproduced the rear (*hậu phương*) where, not coincidentally, lay the largely agrarian manpower and resources of the population at large.<sup>31</sup> To paraphrase Mao Tse-Tung, without a rear one cannot sit down and regain one's strength.<sup>32</sup> Etymologically, the Sino-Vietnamese root word for rear (*hậu*, meaning “back of” or “behind”) is spatially defined in relation to the root for front (*mặt*, or “face”). Notably, *hậu* also forms the root both for *hậu cần*, or logistics, including the work of ordnance, transportation, and food to serve the military; and for *hậu phương*, or rear, the location in which these resources are

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<sup>30</sup> Tổng cục Hậu cần, *Công tác bảo đảm hậu cần trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> This distinction is not to be confused with the “front” (*mặt trận*) understood in a more abstract sense with respect to political issues; organizations led by the Liên Việt Front, for example, played a large role in mass mobilization, often in “rear” areas.

<sup>32</sup> During the Chinese Civil War, Mao likened a rural base area, or “rear,” to a person's buttocks. J.A.G. Roberts, *A Concise History of China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 235.

collected and out of which they flow towards the front (*mặt trận*).<sup>33</sup>

The making and remaking of the Northwest as military rear and front overlapped historically with processes of making and remaking its territory a frontier of Vietnam. The spatial distinction between, and growing emphasis on, rear and front not only confirms a growing preoccupation among elite political leaders as to the conduct of military struggle. The distinction also maps onto the Northwest Zone as territory featuring both a singular front as well as multiple rears and fronts simultaneously: as an interior part of Vietnam that faces an exterior space not Vietnam (i.e., Laos and China); and site of multiple interiors and exteriors inside itself (i.e., remaining Thái Federation territory as well as fortified French positions at Nà Sản and, later, Điện Biên Phủ).

The Vietnamese language etymology of rear and front has a parallel in English and French. “Frontier” or “*frontière*” also has roots in the idea of a military front, what Lucien Febvre calls a “line of troops disposed in battle formation facing the enemy.”<sup>34</sup> Although this military definition of frontier covers the distinction contained within a singular front (i.e., national/international spaces), it neglects multiply contested terrain within the Northwest itself. It was precisely the presence of multiple frontiers, moreover, that posed such difficulties for legitimizing sovereign territorial control there, particularly in terms of foreign enemies and national friends.<sup>35</sup> The emerging Northwest frontier, then, was a Janus-faced construction both within DRV territory and partially outside its control, at once a site of multiple internalized rears and fronts

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<sup>33</sup> Phan Văn Các, *Từ Điển Từ Hán Việt* (TP Hồ Chí Minh: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2003), 184.

<sup>34</sup> Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1973), 208.

<sup>35</sup> As discussed earlier, I question Carl Schmitt’s distinction between friend and enemy as the generative force of political awareness. *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Notwithstanding all their legitimation work to the contrary, the DRV faced no singular “external” enemy but multiple, uncertain enemies located internal to claimed territory. To the contrary, externalized populations of Laos and China were nominal allies, or friends. Who, then, were the enemies within? Were Thái Federation soldiers, officials, and residents Vietnamese, not Vietnamese, or perhaps not *yet* Vietnamese?

and an externalized border. In this light, the military project intended to singularize multiple fronts and, consequently, to align an emerging rear with sovereign territory.

In the meantime, internalizing the Northwest's heavily contested spaces posed particular problems for logistics. Conducting the Northwest Campaign of late 1952 underlined to planners that moving and feeding the People's Army required enormous logistical work: collecting massive amounts of manpower and provisions as well as building and rebuilding transportation infrastructure. As the People's Army expanded its range of movement and grew numerically—to over 250,000 regulars in mid-1953—so, too, did demands placed on a rural population to move and provision it.<sup>36</sup> “Securing logistics,” then, can be thought of as a process of reforming state-society relations to direct agrarian production and labor towards the ostensible “national liberation struggle.” No longer a guerilla war waged in and amongst the population, the People's Army, on behalf of the DRV, mediated processes of social and spatial differentiation. Coercive territorial expansion of centralizing power produced both front and rear, the latter reproduced as site, its population as subjects, of mobilization.

Notwithstanding its growth in numbers, in the early 1950s the People's Army was essentially a non-motorized force reliant on pedestrian forms of transportation and local food supplies. Equipping the military with a steady stream of porters and laborers enabled its mobility throughout national space. Providing the military with food grown by peasant producers enabled soldiers to march and fight. Through what social processes did the territorializing state loose peasant labor and foodstocks from

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<sup>36</sup> General Giáp estimated “French” forces at 445,000 regulars including some 299,000 Vietnamese soldiers, a sub-total that—ironically—outnumbered the entire People's Army. Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Dien Bien Phu: Rendezvous with History* (Hanoi: NXB Thế giới, 2004b), 9. Scholars remain uncertain about People's Army's force strength. William Turley estimates PAVN strength a year later, in July 1954, at 350,000. “Army, Party and Society in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: Civil Military Relations in a Mass-Mobilization System,” PhD Thesis, University of Washington (1972): 85. Cf., Lockhart (1989), ch. 7; Fall (1956), 81; Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1986), ch. 2; King Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 270.

farm and household? How did cadres and soldiers legitimize these claims on actual or potential DRV subjects?

### ***Nationalizing labor***

Establishing codes to regulate the recruitment, collection, and duties of civilian laborers fit into a larger historical pattern. Enmeshed Party and DRV leaders were busily preparing for mobile warfare in the Black River region: in July 1952, the Party's Central Committee created the (imaginary) Northwest Zone and empowered the Northwest Party Committee to lead it; in August 1952, the Politburo approved the "Party's Ethnic Policy"; in September 1952, President Hồ Chí Minh approved the "Eight Orders on Military Conduct." Indeed, DRV guidelines on how to mobilize labor to serve military campaigns was part of a broader effort to prepare for militarized state territorial expansion in space claimed as Vietnam's "Northwest."

Deputy Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng signed the "Temporary Regulations on the mobilization and use of *dân công*" on 30 June and the Government enacted them on 14 July 1952.<sup>37</sup> Like President Hồ's Eight Orders, the regulations codified relations between cadres, soldiers, and civilians in a time of war. Although revolutionary organizations had relied on local labor for several years, the newly reorganized Central Government meant to regularize and legitimize labor usage as "equitable and appropriate" (*công bằng, hợp lý*).

By establishing rules to regulate state recruitment and employment of civilian laborers, the Central Government signaled awareness of how enacting this claim could lead to problems and expressed its intent to solve them. In the recent past, though "the people" had been "enthusiastically fulfilling their duties to the resistance,"

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<sup>37</sup> Referred to in subsequent legislation as, "Điều lệ tạm thời số 183-TTg ngày 14-7-1952 về huy động sử dụng dân công." Phạm Văn Đồng, "Điều lệ tạm thời về huy động sử dụng dân công," 30 June 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1296.



mobilization had been prone to “errors”; such “waste” had damaged, in turn, levels of production and manufacture.<sup>38</sup> As was the case with Son La’s nascent, and short-lived, experience with revolutionary organizing in the late 1940s, state claims on the peasantry’s labor to support the war effort reduced agricultural output. In light of the war’s escalation, the regulation’s preamble stated that resolving this problem demanded the Central Government’s attention:

The work of the resistance war develops in excess with comparison to the growth of manpower *contributions*. Therefore, there is a growing need to regulate the work of *mobilization*, the use of *dân công* that is truly equal and appropriate in order, on the one hand, to guarantee the demands of the resistance war and, on the other, to economize and foster the people’s energy, to advance the production and economizing movement.<sup>39</sup>

The regulations acknowledged a broad tension between allocating labor either to warfare or to production. Faced with a decision, the Central Government resolved not to choose between the two but, rather, to do both: rational regulation proposed to integrate labor mobilization with a movement to boost production. Although these regulations attempted to mitigate mobilization’s unintended negative production effects, this tension remained and would grow in scale, particularly in the Black River region where labor was in short supply and food supply was seasonally tenuous.

Before analyzing the regulations’ content, note two important items of legitimation work. First, the neologism “*dân công*,” defined in one Vietnamese-English dictionary simply as “conscripted laborers,” expressed a new means of legitimating a state claim on society.<sup>40</sup> No longer were those who labored in service of military campaigns, as they had been in the late 1940s, called simply “manual laborers” (*lao công*) or “manpower” (*nhân công*). Now, by neatly reversing the

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<sup>38</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Điều lệ...” 30 June 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1296, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Italics added. *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Đặng Chấn Liêu et al, *Từ Điển Việt-Anh* (TP Hồ Chí Minh: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 2001), 194.

particles of the Vietnamese word for “citizen” (*công dân*), this regulation christened them, “people’s laborers” (*dân công*).<sup>41</sup> Their identification with the “people” placed them, as Party Secretary Trường Chinh had explained, in a revolutionary alliance between the proletariat and peasantry struggling for *national* liberation. Performing one’s duty to labor was thus equated with citizenship, with belonging to, and in, a nation in the making. DRV leaders cleverly recognized reciprocal claims of citizenship rights and duties by coining a term that, literally and figuratively, did the work of both. They legitimized as national service what, in fact, amounted to state conscription of unpaid labor.

Second, use of the word “contributions” builds on this relationship between duties and rights in relation to an emergent community. Because “contributions” was a category in contemporaneous official reports and, since, has been repeated pervasively in official and nationalist histories, it is worth dwelling on what its meaning implies. One never just “contributes” (*đóng góp*) as an atomized individual but, rather, always gives socially.<sup>42</sup> To contribute is a social act that simultaneously calls on and constitutes a community through a form of reciprocal exchange; to give something as part of a collective and, in so doing, to bring that collective into being. To whom or what did these laborers “contribute”?

It is significant, I argue, that these regulations do not state a recipient explicitly but, rather, leave to whom or to what ambiguous. On the one hand, leaving the recipient of “contributions” out of the equation amounts to a discursive trick, an omission that signals a larger commission. After all, it was leaders of an emerging

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<sup>41</sup> Note also that all of these particles—*nhân* (person), *dân* (people), *công* (work), *lao* (labor)—have etymological roots in Chinese phonemes and characters. The Vietnamese language allows for recombining these particles creatively into binomial pairs endowed, or endowable, with new meaning. The neologism’s meaning, particularly an idea of labor as national service, quickly became hegemonic. Phan Văn Các defines *dân công* as, “people who perform duties on behalf of the nation such as irrigation, road repair, serving the frontlines.” *Từ Điển Hán Việt* (2003), 101, 116, 241.

<sup>42</sup> Or, “to make one’s contribution, do one’s bit, do one’s share.” Đặng Chấn Liêu et al (2001), 251.

state who wrote and enforced these regulations and stood to benefit from its products. Behind this legitimation work lay a powerful claim to rule over and for a national community—in short, a state-making project. Ranking members of the VWP and DRV claimed rights to labor power and delegated to subordinates the task of “mobilizing” (*huy động*) it. “Mobilizing” the peasantry meant granting an emergent state powers both to free labor from the everyday tasks of farm work and to reallocate it to a project of nation-state formation. By creating and reserving powers to decide who had to serve and who did not, members of an emerging political elite arrogated for themselves the task of regulating an uncertain boundary between “state” and “society,” or “Government” and “people.” Instituting rules aimed to discipline relations between state and society also contributed to their social formation as ostensibly distinct realms, hierarchically organized.

On the other hand, leaving a recipient out of “contributions” allowed for an emergent community to continue emerging in terms its members could choose for themselves. Anyone who consented—or was coerced—to participate could also choose the intended beneficiary: movement, army, community, friend, cadre, lord, official, etc. There was at this time “a” community in the making cobbled together from many pre-existing communities; forms of symbolic and material exchange played a crucial role in constituting “it.” If this emergent community was a nation, then it was imagined, evolving, and contested. These regulations betray a political project to harness any emergent community or communities to a statist vision of national subjecthood and its responsibilities. This idea of “contributions” ascribes a directionality and purpose to the movement of local labor power and provisions off the farm—i.e., towards “the” Vietnamese nation, always already formed.

Regardless of why in fact a peasant might give to the military or to cadres, to call this act a “contribution” ascribes a telos, an ultimate cause, to this form of public

social action. According to DRV nationalist ideology, there was a continuum describing the degree of self one might (not) give to the stated Vietnamese nation. On one end, withholding support was individualistic, reactionary, or, even, traitorous. In the middle, one could “contribute” labor or grain and earn a sense of membership. More extreme, and more admirable, was to give up one’s own labor and food at cost of one’s own detriment; recall Sơn La’s peasants in 1950 whose giving, and consequent hunger, was recognized as “sacrifice” (*hy sinh*). At the far end, the ultimate form of giving was “martyrdom,” or granting one’s life to the national liberation movement.<sup>43</sup> Such nationalist language ascribes and reinscribes an ultimate purpose to multiple forms, and underlying logics of, exchange and giving.

The July 1952 labor regulations’ content points to broad application and notable exemptions. The first, and most important, rule states: “All citizens (*công dân*) aged between 18 and 50 years are obligated to serve as *dân công*.” This statement effectively amended the 1946 Constitution: not only were citizens obliged to serve *in* the military, they were also obliged to serve *for* the military. The regulations allowed “temporary” exemptions for pregnant women and sickly persons; “full” exemptions for war wounded; “reduced” service for commune officials subject to province approval. Those whose duties were “completely waived” included most government personnel, workers in state enterprises, and teachers. The exemptions indicate a form of service that had, and would continue, to draw largely on men and women working in agriculture, i.e. the peasantry. Whoever tried to shirk their obligation could be tried in public tribunals and sentenced to prison for up to 6 months.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Cf., Shaun Malarney, “‘The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice’: Commemorating War Dead in North Vietnam,” in *The Country of Memory*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Điều lệ...” 30 June 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1296, p. 1, 2, 4.

How long did a given period of required service last? Although this might seem a simple question, the regulations provide no simple answer. The only mention of service durations comes in a section on participant “rights” (*quyền lợi*) regarding how laborers themselves were fed and provisioned. In general, although “persons doing *dân công* must support themselves (*tự túc*),” the regulations mandated different guidelines with respect to service duration. Whereas *dân công* serving “short periods” of less than 5 days “always” provisioned themselves, those serving “from five days to one month” only did so for the initial three days. How long was this long period? Did self-provisioning guidelines mean that one month was the upper limit? Notably, written in long-hand next to this typed order, someone added, “first seven days if the *dân công* period lasts longer than one month.”<sup>45</sup> If we assume that the handwriting indicated a limit beyond one month, then what was the limit? Two months? Three months? Or was there no limit at all? That service duration was ambiguous, I argue, is in and of itself analytically significant, allowing emerging institutions to use (and, in some cases, abuse) *dân công* labor for lengths of time at their own discretion.

The regulations point to the arduous nature of working at behest and on behalf of state and military. After the initial period of self-provisioning, laborers had “rights” to between 1.0 to 1.4 kilograms of rice and 16 grams of salt per day; offices that made use of *dân công* assumed responsibility for providing this “fee” (*tiền thù lao*), or what amounted to a subsistence ration. Tasks ran the gamut of preparing and supplying the battlefield; transporting foodstuffs, cash, tools, munitions, etc.; constructing granaries; building and repairing roads; shoring up waterworks and irrigation infrastructure; and rebuilding structures damaged in combat. Pedestrian porters were to carry between 20-30 kg per person over distances proportionate to topographic relief (and time of day): in level areas, walking between 20-25 km per day (15-20 by night); in mountainous

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

areas, between 15-20 km/day (12-18 by night). Porters riding boats, horses, or bicycles carried more weight: pack bicyclists, for example, were to carry between 60-100 kg from 20-25 km/day. After working 6 days in a row, *dân công* were entitled to one day off; or, after 5 nights in a row, one night off.<sup>46</sup>

To initiate the process of making its subjects into citizen laborers, the Central Government instructed Resistance and Administrative Committees at each territorialized administrative unit—from military Interzone to civilian province and district—to generate plans based on their own requests and those gathered from subordinate specialized agencies and military units. Moreover, actually collecting data on eligible citizens and ensuring their compliance fell on the commune, the local branch of government in closest day-to-day contact with the population. Commune committees (*UBKCHC xã*) had already begun working with Farmers Councils (*Nông hội*) to tax agriculture, generating both grain for soldiers and data on society's productive capacities. Now they were ordered to expand data collection with regards to off-farm labor potentials for villages inside their bailiwicks. In partial recognition of anticipated burdens, the Temporary Regulations also ordered commune committees and Farmers Councils to organize workteams to assist households whose labor was depleted by a member's *dân công* service.<sup>47</sup>

If these regulations empowered cadres, soldiers, and officials to decouple labor from subsistence activities and reallocate it to a state-making project, then “freeing” such labor was a complex and contested process that produced results not always as intended. Subsequent drafts and redrafts of this policy by Central Government officials point to its terms' continuous negotiation and renegotiation. Bureaucratically, local cadres and regional governments negotiated with superiors over which form of

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3, 5-8.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5-6, 11.

labor to prioritize, agricultural production or state service, in order to find a balance between work on-farm or off-farm. All the while, in a dialectical process, local officials transformed labor from abstract category, made it concrete, and then rendered it abstract all over again.<sup>48</sup> In other words, cadres and local officials negotiated with peasants over how to allocate their labor either for military campaigns or tending crops, home, and hearth. With regards to household and farm, they bargained over how to apportion agricultural work to fulfill either state claims on production or household consumption for reproduction. Finally, cadres reported back to their superiors on the “contributions” of local peasants represented as abstract national labor. Analytically, I aim to differentiate, humanize, and make this labor concrete again.

### ***Early miscalculations***

Recruiting labor was contingent on the spatial expansion of state authority. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, the DRV’s incomplete consolidation of its territorial claims contributed to the Sơn Lai Committee’s decision, relatively speaking, to limit claims on local labor. When the People’s Army returned in force in autumn 1952, the People’s Army still relied officially, yet not entirely, on labor from afar.

Only a small fraction of the *dân công* laborers involved in the Northwest Campaign came from the Northwest itself. The Party’s Ethnic Policy had instructed the military operating in “ethnic minority areas” to “limit collection of local *dân công*” in order to avoid both “troubling the people” and excessively damaging their livelihoods.<sup>49</sup> As *dân công* policy had stated, recruiting labor had to be balanced with maintaining local production; at least initially, the balance tilted towards the latter.

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<sup>48</sup> Marx (1973), 103-105.

<sup>49</sup> “Chính sách Dân tộc thiểu số của Đảng hiện nay (Nghị quyết Bộ Chính trị),” Aug 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 277.

Further, propaganda and education would take time to teach the newly “liberated” population, first, that they belonged to a nation and, second, that such belonging entailed obligations.

For the military, moving some 36,000 soldiers into the newly created Northwest Zone presented its own problems.<sup>50</sup> Their engagements with French and Federation forces took them some 300-500 km distant from sources of (already) mobilized labor, food, and supplies. Linking mobile units with base areas necessitated stringing together a pair of long supply lines reliant on extra-local pedestrian transport. One group from the southern Red River Delta and adjacent areas traveled up through Hoà Bình along Road 41 (now, National Highway 6). Another group from the Việt Bắc base and the northern Red River delta traveled through Nghĩa Lộ along Road 13.<sup>51</sup>

Leading this second group was General Giáp who, later, recalled how the region’s mountainous, narrow pathways had forced soldiers and laborers to march in single file. Without specifying their number, he remembered clearly that *dân công* outnumbered combatants: lined up behind the soldiers, he said, they formed an “interminable file.”<sup>52</sup> How many laborers actually assisted this expedition between October and December 1952?

Quantifying the number of laborers and porters involved in the Northwest Campaign was of profound strategic interest to military and DRV leaders: armed with this data, they could plan more effectively for the next military campaign. Yet a simple answer to this question was, and still remains, elusive. That there was and remains no consensus is significant for several reasons. First, the lack of knowledge

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<sup>50</sup> Estimated force strength from Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, *Tóm tắt các chiến dịch trong kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 2000), 390.

<sup>51</sup> Those following the southern path (Road 41) came from Sơn La, Hoà Bình, Thanh Hoá, Nghệ An, Hà Nam; the northern path (Road 13) from the provinces of Yên Bái, Tuyên Quang, Phú Thọ, Vĩnh Phúc. Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, *Lịch sử cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp 1945-1954*, vol II (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1995), 207.

<sup>52</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp, *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 2004a), 395.



demonstrates how state and military planners had yet to institute measures to track civilian labor. Second, investigating divergent answers is of analytical and historiographic interest. Notwithstanding lingering questions about the accuracy of either source, official military figures reported long after the fact contrast tellingly with contemporaneous local figures—indicating compliance or violation, respectively, of reigning DRV regulations.

Military planners estimated that 35,000 *dân công* would be needed to transport supplies from rear areas to “the” front.<sup>53</sup> Yet these estimates fell short of the amount of manpower (and supplies) actually required to serve multiple and mobile fronts. Official military histories state unequivocally that the Northwest Campaign ultimately required a total of 194,000 *dân công*, performing 7 million labor days.<sup>54</sup> Dividing the labor days (7 million) by the number of *dân công* (194,000) yields an average service duration of just over one month per person (36 days). If we assume that the 1952 Temporary Regulations capped service durations at one month (according to the typed “long term” duration), then these figures roughly correspond, producing a result nearly in compliance.<sup>55</sup> If the Regulations did not limit time durations by keeping them vague, then there was no violation.

By contrast, local contemporaneous reports present divergent figures. In late December 1952, just after the campaign’s conclusion, the Northwest Party Committee praised “the spirit of sacrifice” among the 65,000 *dân công* mobilized up to then who,

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<sup>53</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 206-7.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* Or, 200,000 *dân công* and 7 million days in Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, (2000), 393.

<sup>55</sup> In terms of what they carried, initial estimates allotted 9,000 tons of food and 120 tons of munitions, medicine, and tools. Subsequent estimates approximate the actual burden: nearly 10,000 tons of food (9,360 tons of rice, 164 tons salt, 195 tons meat, 71 tons assorted foodstuff) and 31 tons of munitions; and 535 war wounded to field hospitals. Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 206. Calculating weightload per person is uncertain because sources do not specify the number of trips each laborer made from point of supply to front. For example, dividing the total tonnage (10,000 tons) by the number of laborers yields an average load of 50 kg/person. Assuming two trips per laborer, calculated estimates roughly conform with the regulated limit of 20 kg/person.

measured from “Centerpoint to frontlines,” had performed 5 million labor days.<sup>56</sup>

Nguyễn Khánh added that this count did not include an additional sum of over 9,000 *dân công* mobilized in “newly liberated zones” of Nghĩa Lộ, Sơn La, and Lai Châu.<sup>57</sup>

These latter figures indicate one potential and one actual violation of Central Government policies. First, each laborer worked, on average, two and a half months (77 days), a duration that makes sense because it matches the length of the campaign. This duration endured long beyond any vaguely-defined outer-limits of the Temporary Regulation’s non-short term typed period of one month. However, if there were no time limits, as the handwriting suggests, then there was no violation: vagueness worked to the advantage of “state” which simultaneously wrote and enforced regulations. Second, using local people from “newly liberated zones” as military labor, all of whom must have been from “ethnic minority areas,” did violate the Party’s Ethnic Policy.

Even these figures on local participation, however, were revised steadily upwards and reach no internal agreement. In February 1953, a Northwest Party Committee report stated that 8,412 *dân công* laborers had been “mobilized” in Yên Bái, Lào Cai, and Mộc Châu to serve the Northwest Campaign.<sup>58</sup> In October 1954, the Northwest Administrative Committee reported that, populations in “free zones” of Lào Cai and Yên Bái had been educated in the *dân công* policy during the Northwest Campaign, and, as a result, 8,800 laborers were “mobilized” to serve the Northwest

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<sup>56</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, Đảng LĐVN, Ban chấp hành Khu XX, “Báo cáo công tác vùng mới giải phóng trong 2 tháng 10, 11/52,” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> Laborers itemized as follows: from Nghĩa Lộ (1006 + 400 = 1400 in two waves); from Sơn La (7900); from Lai Châu (b/w 50 and 100). Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 2, 7. Another report confirms local participation but diverges by count: 1,000 *dân công* from Nghĩa Lộ serving 15 day tours (and 200 tons rice); 3,000 from Sơn La (and 340 tons rice); figures for Lai Châu were “not yet known.” Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược về tình hình công việc chính quyền trong hai tháng 10 và 11—1952 tại vùng mới được giải phóng ở Tây Bắc,” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Or, 6612 in Yên Bái, 300 in Lào Cai, 1500 in Mộc Châu. ĐLĐVN, Ban Chấp hành Khu Tây Bắc, “Báo cáo tình hình Tây Bắc và nhiệm vụ năm 1953,” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 3.

Campaign.<sup>59</sup> Were either of these figures the same as the 9,000 figure reported by Nguyễn Khánh above? Or were they both different and additional to his earlier estimate? As if these confusing figures were not enough, the Northwest Committee's October 1954 report adds that, by January 1953, 16,421 laborers had been "mobilized... to serve the front."<sup>60</sup> Which front is unclear: did they serve the Northwest Campaign proper, subsequent combat at Nà Sản and Lai Châu, or all of them? Where they came from is also vague: the Northwest's newly liberated zones, free zones, or both? Was this latter figure a sum total of all the above? Or a supplement?

The variance in reported labor participation at this time reveals much about the operations and capacities of an emerging state. If the contemporaneous figures are accurate, then military officers and regional officials may have abused extra-local laborers by working them beyond service durations; and pressed locals into service against the prevailing Ethnic Policy. Years later, official historians attempted to finesse their predecessors' potential and actual violations by inflating the figure of laborers to produce a fictive compliance. Yet nothing indicates acknowledgment of these violations or, even, what kind of punishment they may have merited. By contrast, should a citizen-laborer not perform his or her duties, the regulations stated explicitly that he or she end up in jail.

This observed disparity between rules and their application raises a number of thought-provoking questions. To whom did central policy apply? To whom did it not apply? If violating laws was routine, what did this codification do? Was its social function theatrical? To demonstrate a (fictive) rationality? To give an illusion of

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<sup>59</sup> Le Trung Dinh, UBHC Khu TB, "Báo cáo kiểm điểm công tác xây dựng Khu Tây Bắc từ ngày thành lập đến nay (7/1952-7/1954) trước hội nghị kháng chiến hành chính và chuyên môn khu hợp lần đầu tiên," 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*; Đảng LĐVN, "Báo cáo..." 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 4.

central control not followed in practice? With respect to labor recruitment, I might argue that such central policy partially legitimated the work of cadres and local officials who did not, necessarily, follow all the rules.

Finally, that variance in the reported number of laborers was very wide—by a factor of three—is, in and of itself, noteworthy. Evidently, different institutions had different and widely variable figures, pointing to bureaucratically-isolated accounting measures. The variance between them points to limited capacity of “state”—i.e., bureaucratically and institutionally integrated—to anticipate and enumerate claims on an emerging national society. Growing awareness of this fact stimulated enmeshed Party, DRV, and People’s Army leaders to develop a centralized system, and accompanying institutions, for counting and accounting for civilian labor. Thus was initiated another iteration in a process of institutional learning.

### ***The liberation effect or, mobilization by example***

Military operations were intended not only to acquire territory but also to perform legitimation work among the population they “liberated.” The military’s intended role in legitimation work was unambiguous. Just prior to the Northwest Campaign, Hồ Chí Minh told cadres assembled before their departure, “[we] must ensure that each soldier is a propagandist.”<sup>61</sup> By demonstrating exemplary behavior codified in President Hồ’s “Eight Orders” on military conduct, the People’s Army reflected—and attempted to impart—ideals of service to nation.<sup>62</sup> Before the onset of the campaign, civilian cadres and military officers all received training in these “Eight Orders” and, as they moved through the region, they educated people in their content

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<sup>61</sup> “Bài nói tại Hội nghị cán bộ chuẩn bị chiến dịch Tây Bắc,” *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, vol 6 yrs 1950-1952 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 1995), 560.

<sup>62</sup> “Tám điều mệnh lệnh của Chính phủ Dân chủ Cộng hoà Việt Nam,” *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, vol 6 yrs 1950-1952 (1995), 564-567. See earlier discussion for more on content.

both implicitly and explicitly. How they comported themselves in fulfilling their duties was an act, one to be performed in front of their local audience.

Together, in addition to their fighting and hauling, the soldiers and *dân công* who marched into the Northwest in late 1952 set an example of self-sacrificing service among the local population. Phan Mỹ recognized the “attitude” and “behavior” of soldiers who, through their conduct, “made the people respect and believe in the Government and in the army.”<sup>63</sup> Embodying national ideals was a performative act intended to galvanize support for the anti-colonial war-effort among former subjects of the Thái Federation.

Of course, the military and their *dân công* laborers did not move through the region alone. Guiding them were cadres versed in local conditions and acting under orders from the Zone’s Party Committee.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, members of the emergent local government closely tracked the military as they moved through, reoccupied, and acquired—or, “liberated”—Thái Federation territory. Together, by defeating counter claimants to territory and by building institutions for monopoly rule, soldiers and cadres formed the DRV’s spearhead. Historically, their actions were integrated and inseparable as a form of militarized state-making. For purposes of analysis, the following account assesses the army’s role distinctly before resuming, in the next section, assessing how cadres capitalized on this initial enforcement to legitimize and institutionalize a new form of power recognized as state.

Recall that the Northwest Campaign’s timing overlapped with the region’s annual rice harvest. How the People’s Army positioned itself in relation to food and agricultural labor, therefore, became an opportunity for legitimation work. Soldiers

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<sup>63</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, 5-7.

and laborers marching through the region not only encountered farmers pre-occupied with agricultural work. They also assisted cultivators during the season when demands on local labor were at their peak. Or, in line with the “Eight Orders,” soldiers “defended the people’s livelihoods” by assisting farmers with the autumn rice harvest.<sup>65</sup> Soldiers and laborers also “defended the people’s property” by refraining from picking vegetables or fruit without first obtaining permission from the cultivator. At the crossroads of Heo Village, for example, thousands of soldiers and laborers marching by night left roadside gardens intact because they had not obtained permission to trade from cultivators.<sup>66</sup>

Just as President Hồ had declared that “each soldier is a propagandist,” members of the military engaged in construction and deconstruction. Army Engineers built bridges that facilitated movement by soldiers and farmers alike.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the military enacted the old regime’s dismantlement as well as the demonstration of new norms and regulations. Soldiers assumed control over the Federation’s grain storehouses and redistributed their contents to the same rice growers who had produced its stores. As mentioned above in Chapter 4, they abrogated the old regime’s restrictions and released people from “concentrated settlements,” allowing them to return to their home villages, to stay in huts close to their fields, to fish, and to resume hunting in the forest at night.<sup>68</sup> Soldiers, officers, and laborers were often the first DRV representatives to encounter the region’s population. By forming disciplined institutions and performing their legitimacy, they played a deeply symbolic role in front of what could be a skeptical audience.

Of course, not everyone celebrated when the People’s Army appeared on the

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<sup>65</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Bảo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 7.

<sup>66</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Bảo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Bảo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4, 6; Sa Van Minh, Chủ tịch UBKCHC tỉnh Sơn La, “Thông cáo về việc hủy bỏ các thể lệ cấm đoán tàn ác của giặc Tây,” 16 October 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306.

horizon, particularly those areas where DRV affiliates had yet to make any prior contact. Recall that the area in and around Lai Châu remained under Thái Federation control, now considered to be a “temporarily occupied area.” As for “recently liberated areas,” particularly those places “where we have no infrastructure,” recorded Nguyễn Khánh, the “enemy” spread “counterpropaganda about the Viet Minh” among people as they did harvest work, leaving them “suspicious and scared of us.”<sup>69</sup> French and Federation propagandists, in other words, were able to mimic the DRV’s own strategy, to politicize pre-existing forms of collective organization. As the People’s Army approached these areas, residents “melted” into the forest or, subsequently, tried to avoid villages where cadres and soldiers frequented. In order to avoid such popular avoidance of contact, soldiers and cadres alike foregrounded the work of “assuring the people” and to spread their own propaganda or, to counter counterpropaganda, based on the “Eight Orders.”<sup>70</sup>

Some reactions to the arrival of the People’s Army were vague and uncertain. Villagers of Sa Haj Village, Quang Huy commune, Phù Yên District fled the advancing People’s Army to take refuge in the forest. Before they left, however, the villagers held a feast over the course of five days: they slaughtered five water buffalo and six pigs because, reportedly, “they could not bring livestock with them.”<sup>71</sup> Recall that prior to the Northwest Campaign Quang Huy had been site of Cầm clan power before its senior men sought refuge elsewhere. Perhaps the orgy of feasting was meant to consume livestock that belonged to departed clan members. Or, peasants feared that the People’s Army or returning clan members might repossess their own livestock.

Overall, however, military advance and political legitimacy were inextricably tied in the minds of cadres, soldiers, and many local residents alike. In an intoxicating

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<sup>69</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

display of force, military “liberation” simultaneously, if only partially and temporarily, legitimized and instituted DRV rule. By defeating French-allied forces, dismantling Federation regulations, and reaching out to the population, the DRV and its military produced an intended two-fold “liberation effect” among the population: to galvanize a new sense of community in the image of state and, second, to predispose them, as the “people,” towards its service. The Northwest Zone’s Political Commissar, Nguyễn Khánh, observed the Northwest Campaign’s effect among the population as follows:

The victory in the Northwest has made the soldiers and people happy, elated, and increasingly confident in President Hồ, the Center, the Government; confident in the strength of the military, in a long, difficult, but certain-to-be-victorious resistance; manifested by compatriots in free zones who harvested early and contributed their agricultural tax and rushed forward excitedly to perform *dân công*. In particular, according to people in the Northwest’s newly liberated areas, the victory has already broken the enemy’s exploitative and oppressive yoke, and has replaced [it] with freedom and happiness such that the compatriots excitedly express their heartfelt gratitude for President Hồ, the Government, and military. The victory in the Northwest has improved soldiers’ morale and has made the remaining puppet authorities and military feel puzzled and disconsolate.<sup>72</sup>

Although “victory” was only partial (French Expeditionary Forces had regrouped at the Nà Sản stronghold; the Thái Federation was still in control of Lai Châu) and the outcome would prove only temporary (French paratroopers would retake Điện Biên Phủ in late 1953), passages such as this are some of the only traces available for assessing the Northwest Campaign’s popular reception. According to its logic, popular enthusiasm among soldiers and civilians alike was an intended effect of “liberation.” The military victory of one regime and defeat of its rival worked dialectically to legitimize the DRV and to delegitimize the Thái Federation. The words used to ascribe and/or self-describe—the difference is analytically significant but textually unclear—

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<sup>72</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 2.



“the people” reverberate with the revolution’s own mantra: “independence, freedom, happiness.”<sup>73</sup>

The exemplary performance of overwhelming, coordinated, and disciplined military force re-appeared, reflection-like, in society. Perhaps only temporarily and certainly unevenly, disparate residents became “a” people of the Northwest connected with and part of some larger—be it national, anti-colonial, revolutionary, and/or resistance—community in the making. This communal solidarity is the first moment in the liberation effect. Next, their initial enthusiasm for the new regime and distaste for the old regime appeared to inspire a sense of gratitude, one that predisposed them to obey the former’s regulations, such as the agricultural tax, and to serve it bodily, as *dân công* laborers. This willingness to “contribute” to an emerging yet ill-defined community is the liberation effect’s second moment.

If the liberation effect appeared as communal enthusiasm and willingness to serve, then state-makers also endeavored to harness any popular response to an ongoing political project. Nguyễn Khánh continues the above passage and ends on a telling note:

This victory has made the human and material resources in the Northwest into a reserve force to train and foster for the resistance forces.<sup>74</sup>

The emerging Northwest, in other words, was territory endowed with human and material resources. Political leaders intended the military victory not only to claim territory for the rising DRV but also to transform the local population into loyal citizens and obliged subjects of the DRV. This was the liberation project, a state claim-making practice enabling and enabled by militarized territorial expansion.

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<sup>73</sup> The Vietnamese triumvirate (*độc lập, tự do, hạnh phúc*) partially reflects that of their colonial predecessors, “*liberté, égalité, fraternité*.” All French and DRV letterhead bear respective slogans.

<sup>74</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 2.

In addition to doing their jobs, members of the military and their support crew did them well. They produced the liberation effect by engaging in social learning predicated on an idea of emulation. For laborers to carry their loads, or for the military to fight, was only marginally more important than how they comported themselves while fulfilling these duties. Completing their proximate tasks was only the first move in creating a broader, collective sense of responsibility: they also demonstrated exemplary national service and invited others to perform similarly.

By performing tasks in a model fashion, the military and downstream *dân công* also encouraged the local population to emulate (*thi đua*) their model behavior and attitude. As a model of social learning, emulation, also known as mirroring (*làm gương*), has a long tradition in Vietnam, one the Workers' Party cultivated and renewed.<sup>75</sup> The desired effect was to mobilize by example: to constitute the local population as “the people” and to encourage this new collective form to participate in the war-effort—as productive peasant subjects willing to share resources—ostensibly on their own behalf.

As Nguyễn Khánh indicated above, leaders were interested in how the mobile forces might make “a reserve force,” or inspire a willingness among the local population to perform *dân công* service in subsequent military campaigns. The Northwest Party Committee singled out the visiting *dân công* for praise, for displaying a “spirit of sacrifice [while] serving the front,” for exemplifying a “supportive and enthusiastic people.” It was their example as a people, as a revolutionary national

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<sup>75</sup>Alexander Woodside observes that premodern scholars steeped in Confucian tradition both transmitted moral teachings and embodied them. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars debated morality under colonial rule; Dương Bá Trạc, for example, argued for transmitting and embodying not only morality but also desirable national habits. *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 70-71. Kenneth MacLean writes that the VWP adopted this model of social learning to create new collectivities. “The Arts of Disclosure” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2005), 19-20.

community, that Party leadership hoped would rub off on their new subjects, i.e. to instill a new sense of membership and responsibility. The Committee recognized those local residents who acted like brave soldiers, performing duties in spite of any danger who, for example, had prior to 1952 “thrown themselves (*lăn lộn*) into secret activities” or who, in late 1952, “enthusiastically loaned rice to soldiers, worked as *dân công*, and assisted cadres and soldiers to appeal to former [Thái Federation] soldiers.” To complete the circle, they rewarded such exemplary service with “commendations (*khen thưởng*) for work on behalf of the revolution” by staging displays of official gratitude at commune and district complexes, hoping to encourage and propagate such behavior among a still larger audience.<sup>76</sup>

Local officials were also aware, however, that the Northwest’s relatively low population density posed a potential labor shortage in the future, compromising the making of a “reserve force.” Thus they endeavored to expand the pool of eligible laborers in two ways. Ideals of service extended to all “races” (*chủng tộc*), by which officials most likely meant Hmong and other highland groups unaccustomed to corvée or bonded labor.<sup>77</sup> Second, although military service in the regular army may have been an exclusively male activity, providing logistical support extended to both male and female citizen subjects.

In line with revolutionary socialist ideals, emphasizing social equality as constitutive of membership in the evolving national resistance community entailed obligations. Through performative example, local officials hoped to transform customs regulating gender and cultural relations. “Before” the campaign, observed Nguyễn Kháng, women were unaccustomed to tread far from their natal village. Yet, after

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<sup>76</sup> Nguyễn Kháng, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 2, 11.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9. Recall Trường Chinh’s definition of “races” as “ethnic minorities of small population scattered about haphazardly like compatriots [who are] Mèo, Trại, Lô Lô, etc.” “Hoàn thành giải phóng...” *Văn kiện Đảng*, vol 12, yr 1951 (2001), 139.

seeing “women *dân công* from downstream,” he claimed that local women also became “enthusiastic participants.” While their mothers hauled rice, small Hmong girls accompanied them to their destination, just to catch a glimpse of soldiers guarding a grain storehouse. Even a blind Hmong woman from Phù Yên “volunteered” to work as a *dân công* porter.<sup>78</sup> Whether these women actually volunteered is open to question. If they did volunteer, it is unclear why they did so—whether out of a sense of patriotic fervor and/or because they wished to challenge local patriarchal norms. In any event, the emerging revolutionary community presented a new range of possibilities, and its project carried a new set of obligations, for highland peoples and women. The making of labor was a deeply cultural process involving not just the legitimation of rule *per se* but also, according to Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer, “the regulated formation of identities and subjectivities (male as much as female).”<sup>79</sup>

Although their reception was spatially uneven, the military and their laborers’ embodiment of national ideals appeared to have a cumulative effect on the “newly liberated” local population: to articulate a new sense of community based on shared suffering and triumph. By the end of the autumn 1952 Northwest Campaign, the Central Government’s delegate Phan Mỹ felt emboldened to declare:

The people understand clearly the need to help the army strike the French, have the consciousness to participate in the resistance, and welcome their chance to do their duties like the downstream compatriots who work as *dân công* up here.<sup>80</sup>

For the local people to feel suddenly motivated to perform arduous, backbreaking labor may seem improbable. But imparting a sense of duty through an ethic of

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<sup>78</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Corrigan and Sayer, *The Great Arch* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 141.

<sup>80</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 8.

emulation was an intended, and significant, component in socially producing the liberation effect. Even if the number of local laborers was still relatively small, the military campaign's impact on the broader population was immediate. Cadres were quick to capitalize on the soldiers' advance.

The arrival of the military in force and the return of cadres signaled the onset of a territorializing form of power. Although the military moved on to different fronts, the cadres remained to their rear: rear and front emerged during this period as new spatial forms regulating relations of rule, production, and exchange. Although the DRV's hold on the Northwest Zone was still contested and only partial, cadres nonetheless established and drew on DRV power to institute and legitimate reciprocal exchanges. In so doing, they stimulated processes through which emerged collectivized and individualized forms of identity, subjecthood, and responsibility. Over the course of the Northwest Campaign and through the next year, these cadres transformed what had been an informal exchange in the late 1940s. They worked to institute a more formal exchange predicated on, and mediated by, an emerging boundary between state and society.

### *An Economy of Anxiety*

Creating a "reserve force" produced social responses widely divergent from any welcome to "liberation." If the population initially greeted the army with enthusiasm in an expression of communal recognition, then they responded to warfare and growing state claims with anxiety. The former was the intended liberation effect and popular affect; the latter its underlying project and lurking, unintended affect.

The same reports that describe popular enthusiasm for liberation note also its opposite, that of anxiety, and present the analyst with a puzzle. On the one hand, the liberation effect appeared to constitute a "people" and, among this new collective, to

instill a sense of “enthusiasm” (*hăng hái*) regarding membership in an emergent community accompanied by spontaneous outpourings of labor and material support. On the other hand, this emergent community (referred to as the “people”) is often described as “anxious” or “worried” (*thắc mắc*) in reference to labor obligations and provisioning requirements—i.e., the state-levied responsibilities of being a member of this community.<sup>81</sup> How does the analyst reconcile such conflicting and contradictory social responses? Were the different reactions sequentially ordered? Did initial enthusiasm give way to anxiety as the weight of obligation became clearer to those who would bear its load? Or, were the two responses always there? Did worry lurk behind excitement, only to surface when possibilities associated with Thái Federation defeat yielded to realities—including real or threatened coercion—of DRV rule? I argue that these seemingly differential responses were not mutually exclusive.

One way to assess the initial social response to the DRV is to reconsider the liberation effect, to understand popular enthusiasm, willingness, and anxiety together *and* as sequentially related. Though this answer may appear ambiguous and uncertain, relations at the moment of “liberation” were similarly laden with ambiguity and uncertainty. One of the few local responses quoted in full brings these qualities to the fore. “Many compatriots in Phú Yên,” reads a report, “spoke aloud” that,

“If the cadres and military several years earlier had done the same as cadres and soldiers did this year then certainly [they would have] won, and the Westerners (*Tây*) would not have been able to be here until now.”<sup>82</sup>

Although Nguyễn Khánh interpreted this statement as evidence of successful legitimization work, its meaning was not, nor is not, fixed. To interpret it differently,

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<sup>81</sup> Cf., Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456; Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306.

<sup>82</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 6.

recall that an earlier round of cadres and guerilla soldiers had been in this same area in the late 1940s, when and where they shared conditions of scarcity and danger with peasant supporters. It was a moment of being together. When faced with a French counterattack in 1950, however, cadres and guerillas had fled to regroup elsewhere. For residents left behind who faced retribution and continuing deprivation collectively, it was a moment of separation and subjective differentiation. As such, this statement can be read as divergent from its cited meaning, as both critique of an earlier abandonment and a half-hearted welcome back. In other words, what took *you* so long to come back here, to *us*? Had *you*—i.e., “cadres and soldiers”—done this earlier, then *we*—i.e. your supporters in place—might have been spared two years of additional suffering. For these people of Phù Yên, the presence of DRV soldiers and cadres reminded them of a prior absence, stimulating an affective response marked by resentment and gratitude, anxiety and enthusiasm, worry and hope.

Another way to analyze varied responses to “liberation” is to think about the DRV intervention’s intended and unintended effects. I have analyzed above liberation’s intended effects, i.e. enthusiasm, as a product of emulatory modes of teaching and learning. I address unintended effects below by showing how a statist project that anticipated, accompanied, and followed military conquest elicited anxiety.

### *Harvest and taxation*

Because the autumn 1952 military campaign coincided with—and threatened—the region’s rice harvest, agrarian production was foremost among farmers’ concerns. As rice matured in late October, the people were “alarmed that airplanes might destroy [seed-bearing plants], concerned about leaving for *dân công* duties, and, overall, very worried about the harvest.” These worries were well-founded. Troops moving about invited French warplanes to bomb and strafe rice fields

doubling as battlefields. Supplying and supporting the People's Army diverted scarce resources away from repair and reproduction. As wet-rice rice harvest approached, the Northwest Party Committee convened a Cadre Conference in November to emphasize the "crux" of cadres' work: safeguarding the fall rice crop.<sup>83</sup>

Through this harvest period, cadres remained in village settings both to ensure the rice crop's safety as well as to begin modifying agricultural practices. In line with Conference orders, they set about instituting a program aimed to keep farmers in their fields, to increase their labor efficiency, and to transform agricultural work. Because enemy planes scared farmers away from their fields, cadres taught them evasive tactics such as wearing camouflage, avoiding brightly colored clothes, and harvesting fields in sections before hiding in the forest. Cadres attempted to improve labor efficiency by teaching new techniques for cutting rice in bunches rather than by individual stalks. They tried to instill a sense of time discipline by encouraging farmers to work longer daylight hours, extend the work week, and do fieldwork by night. They organized mixed gender youth groups to reap and thresh rice, hoping to discredit local customs structuring such tasks as appropriate only for women or people of "correct age."<sup>84</sup> Though modest at first, these state efforts foreshadowed more sustained projects to transform the means and claim the ends of agricultural production.

During the extended period of warfare, of all the agrarian reforms to be implemented in the Northwest Zone, the DRV's agricultural tax was perhaps the most significant. Beginning with Decree 13/SL of May 1951, the Central Government had moved to simplify and centralize the agricultural tax (*thuế nông nghiệp*) with payments collected in kind.<sup>85</sup> According to a progressive scale, farmers surrendered a

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<sup>83</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Sắc lệnh của Chủ tịch nước Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hoà số 13-SL, 1 May 1951. Accessed online on 2 Aug 2010 at <<http://www.chinhphu.vn/>>.



variable amount of harvested grain. By facilitating assessments in public village settings, cadres hoped to impart an appreciation for “equitable and appropriate” government policy such that farmers would “vigilantly”—i.e., a self-disciplined form of voluntarism—bring forward their assessed amount to state-controlled granaries.<sup>86</sup> Most grain then belonged to the Central Government which, in turn, distributed much of it to feed the growing People’s Army. A smaller portion remained in local granaries to balance regional budgets.

Taxation not only provided grain for the military but also yielded knowledge of the population to emerging state institutions. Its iterative application enabled the rising state to collect all manner of data on new subjects which, in turn, increased state capacity to lead subsequent transformative projects. All in all, the agricultural tax served more than what one scholar calls a “dual purpose,” i.e. an instrument of class struggle against landed proprietors and a means to rationalize government coffers.<sup>87</sup> By collecting data on cultivators as well as storing rice for the army, the agricultural tax underpinned increasing state capacity to govern its population and to expand territorially.

Just as Phan Mỹ had described the Northwest’s four largest “rice baskets,” subsequent reports echoed the region’s territory in terms of “economic and financial” values and described a state program for collecting a share.<sup>88</sup> Yet the Zone’s Party Committee reported what, at best, appears to be checkered results for year 1952 tax assessment and collection. Of “free zones” Yên Bái fulfilled 100% of its targets by collecting 5,363 tons; Lào Cai fulfilled 88% by collecting 1,941 tons. Of all the “newly liberated zones” only one district in Sơn La had implemented the tax, but this

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<sup>86</sup> Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ huyện Điện Biên, *Lịch sử Đảng Bộ huyện Điện Biên* (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2005), 95.

<sup>87</sup> Lockhart (1989), 248-250.

<sup>88</sup> Anonymous, “Củng cố kinh tế tài chính vùng tự do xây dựng kinh tế tài chính vùng mới giải phóng,” 12 March 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472.

district (Mộc Châu) did not report any data.<sup>89</sup> The province of Lai Châu is not listed: although much of its area was still “occupied,” the omission of “liberated” Điện Biên Phủ—the region’s rice basket—is notable and curious. Because of late collection, inappropriate assessments, elite resistance, and suspicious cultivators, even these modest results were achieved only on the basis of an extensive *ex post facto* recalculation.<sup>90</sup>

Notwithstanding the difficulties encountered in applying the agricultural tax, the Party Committee learned from these early experiences by pointing to the “success” of Yên Bái. Just as data on Văn Chấn’s ethnic profile (also in Yên Bái) emboldened cadres there to discuss the Ethnic Policy publicly, initial knowledge facilitated more knowledge and, in turn, a growing state capacity. The Zone’s Political Commissar singled out the provincial government for praise because, during the Northwest Campaign, they integrated the work of “serving the front” with the task of assessing taxes.<sup>91</sup> In other words, the local government was able to collect grain from producers and distribute it to the advancing army in a timely fashion. In addition, they learned how many farmers contributed to the tax and how many cadres were necessary to collect it. After the campaign’s conclusion, therefore, regional government was able to “concentrate knowledge” of agricultural capacity and state manpower.<sup>92</sup>

The emphasis on concentrating knowledge means the lack of knowledge about the Northwest’s western reaches, including Điện Biên Phủ, fits a pattern. Through taxation, the emergent state accrued knowledge about itself and its real or potential subject population. In the next round of taxation for year 1953’s harvest, more local government institutions would apply this model elsewhere, marching steadily

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<sup>89</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo 3 tháng đầu năm 1953,” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 11.

<sup>90</sup> Anon., “Củng cố kinh tế...” 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 5-6.

<sup>91</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 11.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

westward. This process of social learning and its centralization among state agencies worked iteratively, enabling officials in the next round of taxation to claim still more provisions from an even broader population. In reciprocal processes, state learning both of itself and of an agrarian society empowered militarized territorialization: the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign of 1953-54 would require many more provisions from many more peasants to feed many more soldiers.

### *Uneven Exchange*

The cadres who returned on the heels of soldiers in late 1952 found conditions of scarcity among Black River peoples similar to what had confronted their forebears in the late 1940s. Some cadres quickly realized that cultivating symbolic legitimacy hinged on restarting and expanding forms of material exchange. Once again, those cadres sensitive to the nature of this exchange observed what goods were in short supply and reported to their superiors the importance of importing and distributing them. Other cadres, however, were too preoccupied with the military campaign to observe who bore its costs. The pattern of reciprocal exchange was at a crossroads.

In late 1952, many farmers could barely meet their own household consumption needs, never mind those of the military. In addition to the hazards combat posed to farm work, a profound shortage of agricultural capital limited the ability of farmers to return to agricultural production. Though they were now “free” to return to their gardens and fields, farmers accustomed to war-time shortages and high prices often lacked the tools necessary to work their land. If residents from villages who had been evicted and “concentrated” during Thái Federation rule faced extreme conditions of scarcity, then their experiences serve as indicators of the “recently liberated” population more broadly. For example, the 30 families of Coi Village in Phù Yên, “did not have even one farm tool; no knives to harvest swidden, no plows,

no draft animals, no seedstock; every day [they] had to go up to the Dao and Hmong and beg for food, or go and dig tubers.” Bereft of agricultural capital, they missed the wet-rice planting period and, further, the time for opening swiddens was almost past.<sup>93</sup>

Guerilla actions from 1948-52 had aimed deliberately to disrupt the Thái Federation’s economy and, by late 1952, succeeded in restricting trade by making virtually impassable what few roads and only river (the Black) led into the area.<sup>94</sup> In essence, local residents now asked the returning DRV to make up for what earlier DRV actions had, in part, deprived them. Evidently, some local cadres heard popular requests, understood their political significance, and requested assistance from their superiors. Although it was in the interest of DRV cadres to ameliorate conditions of scarcity, the legacy and practice of war either limited their ability to do so or blinded them to increasing desperation.

Phan Mỹ heard these concerns, echoed them to his superiors, but described a daunting set of transportation problems. The material dimensions of supplying productive capital were daunting: providing the population of just two districts (Nghĩa Lộ and Phù Yên) with even a bare minimum of agricultural tools, i.e. two knives and one spade per family, amounted to some 30,000 items. Moving these goods to points of distribution in newly liberated zones was forbiddingly difficult. Travel upstream on the Black River was slow: to move one ton of salt from Suối Rút (Mai Châu) up to Văn Yên took five days, reaching Ta Khoa took 10 days, and Quỳnh Nhai 20 days; even then, salt and other goods were still days of overland travel away from communities in, for example, Điện Biên Phủ. The riverine journey was fraught with perils, involving “many rapids” and “hiding by day in caves” to avoid aerial strafing.

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<sup>93</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 7.

<sup>94</sup> Because roads and rivers were virtually impassable, the Đèo family and their patrons were forced to rely on airplanes to import (very limited quantities of) salt and manufactured goods. Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 6.

By comparison, overland transport even within the province of Sơn La itself required enormous human resources: moving one ton of salt from Dôn Vang to Quang Huy required 70 people traveling 6 days and 6 nights.<sup>95</sup> That one ton of salt was used as a metric for comparing transportation labor outlays indicates the enduring political significance, and scarcity, of both labor and salt.

Phan Mỹ expressed regret, however, that scarce labor for pedestrian and riverine transport had already been allocated to the military for transporting their provisions.<sup>96</sup> As such, during the campaign itself, the military's command and logistical staff was preoccupied with supplying the military and, hence, was largely unable to meet the material needs of the newly liberated population. The rising state, and particularly its local agents, inherited the economic problems of supply and transport their predecessors had in part created and their present superiors could not spare the resources to fix. Furthermore, the urgency of supplying the military campaign meant that rising DRV institutions immediately exacted claims on, or extracted labor and rice from, this same population.<sup>97</sup>

As a result of these constraints, restarting trade resembling the revolutionary exchange was slow and spatially uneven. During the campaign, the Northwest Party Committee formed teams of cadres to inspect granaries, solicit data from each province, and present targets for newly liberated areas. Then the goods and a new monetary medium were assembled at distribution points. Allocated to Sơn La and collected at Dôn Vang were 50 tons of salt, 1000 packs of tobacco, 10,000 farm tools, 10,000 meters cloth, and 1 billion *đồng*. Allocated to Yên Bái were 45 tons of salt, 2350 boxes of matches, 1500 packs of tobacco, and 2 billion *đồng*. DRV-issued *đồng* currency would be used to substitute for Indochinese piastres and withdraw the latter

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<sup>95</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 7-8.

from circulation.<sup>98</sup> Note that these allocations included commodities for immediate consumption (salt, tobacco, and cloth) and capital improvement (farmtools).

Nowhere did the Committee meet provincial targets for distributing these goods. Statistics from late November 1952 indicate that the closer a given site's location to the Việt Bắc base area, the more material goods it received. Yên Bái Province on the Northwest Zone's eastern boundary distributed a much higher portion of goods to recipient populations in Nghĩa Lộ and Than Uyên (expressed as percentage of targets): 15 tons salt (33%), 1000 packs of tobacco (66%), and all the matches. Sơn La, farther to the west, received a lower portion: 8 tons salt (16%), 600 knives (6%), 402 packs tobacco (40%), 400 bolts of cloth (4%). Lai Châu, farthest to the west, "had only begun to move" 6 tons of salt from Quỳnh Nhai.<sup>99</sup> Yet the same locations that received the fewest supplies, i.e. Sơn La and Lai Châu, were also home to populations most desperate for material assistance. As a result, delivering promptly on the material promises of "liberation" was less a function of need than of distance to an emerging center of integrated political power *and* material goods.

In particular, salt's uneven distribution was indicative of hardship and posed an opportunity and a risk for the DRV in terms of its political legitimacy. Residents of Nghĩa Lộ who visited the newly opened State Shop said it was the first time in 5-6 years that they had "seen someone holding salt." Praising the new government, they described how "before liberation," there was quantity sufficient only for immediate consumption and not enough to preserve meat.<sup>100</sup> Farther to the west, in Lai Châu and Sơn La, much to the dismay of local residents, there was still not "one handful" (*hót*) of salt available to the general population as late as December 1952. When residents

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<sup>98</sup> The report states only that Sơn La and Yên Bái collected 20,000 and 1,459,756 piastres, respectively. How currency substitution worked in practice is discussed below. *Ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>99</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 13.

<sup>100</sup> Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo sơ lược..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 4.

there saw soldiers flavoring their rations with salt, they begged for just “a few pinches” in order to make “medicine.” Several people in Lai Châu began to wonder aloud “whether or not the Government would supply salt to the people.”<sup>101</sup> These patterns of spatial un-evenness continued to grow over time.

The un-evenness of exchange and claim-making resulted in state “errors” and widespread social “anxiety.”<sup>102</sup> Unlike the late 1940s and notwithstanding the “enthusiasm” with which Nguyễn Khánh praised payees of the agricultural tax, there are no reports of the peasants “zealously” giving away food to cadres and soldiers. Rather, a gradual shift from exchange to institutionalized provisioning (i.e., mobilization) implied an enforcement of state claims on an agrarian population, eliciting popular “anxiety.” Agricultural producers now confronted an obligation to “loan” (*cho vay*) the military portions of their recently harvested rice crop. They worried aloud that if they “loaned” too much, they would be hungry and, further, did not know when the Government might return what it had “borrowed.” Just as *dân công* requirements could easily be confused with forms of corvée or bonded labor, so could provisioning the People’s Army be associated with earlier “post payments” (*nộp bớt*) to French-allied forces. Just as *dân công* requirements often fell disproportionately on the poor, so did the poor often “loan” the military more than the rich.<sup>103</sup> Such inequality may be explicable in light of two ongoing processes: first, the old elite, by assuming positions in the new government, could shirk their new obligations; second, poor peasants, because they anticipated land reform, were eager to support the People’s Army. These class-based inequities in provisioning and laboring, and the anxiety they created, continued to build through 1953 and 1954.

Aware of these state errors and popular anxiety, at least one regional Party

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<sup>101</sup> The treatment may have included iodized sea salt used to treat wide-spread goiter. *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1306, p. 8.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9-10.

leader also understood that allowing such lopsided exchange to continue might undermine the state's own programs. In late December 1952 after the campaign's conclusion, Nguyễn Kháng argued passionately for increasing the flow of goods both to alleviate scarcity and, in so doing, to protect programs reliant on popular support. By then, supplying the people in newly liberated areas with salt and farmtools still had yet to reach levels sufficient "to resolve the people's anxiety." The region's Political Commissar explained that subordinate cadres and Party cells were "not yet truly caring of the people" and, worse, had viewed this work with "indifference" (*lơ là*) because of their preoccupation with the urgent work of "mobilizing foodstuffs and *dân công*." Yet, he argued that these two activities were inseparable, that problems cadres had experienced in gathering labor and food were caused by neglecting local livelihoods. "To treat lightly the everyday needs of the people," he stated, "is an error" and, moreover, fails to recognize that meeting these needs was linked to the "mobilization of manpower and material resources." Concluding his appeal, he spoke in language that central planners might appreciate: without resolving the shortages, thereby increasing the people's trust in the Government, mobilization would yield only diminishing returns.<sup>104</sup>

The Northwest Party Commissar's emphasis on reforming the attitude and behavior of cadres echoed a key phrase from the ongoing "ethnic conference festivities." Just as local representatives to these meetings learned about the "solicitous care of the cadres," Nguyễn Kháng underlined that cadres must embody a willingness to "care for" or "help" (*săn sóc*) the people.<sup>105</sup> To help, nurse, or care for a collective may seem neutral or even benevolent. Yet one can only "help" someone else if one's self has some thing, knowledge, or capacity that the other lacks. Moreover, in

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13-14.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.



Vietnamese, *săn sóc* is used with reference to caring for the infirm, elderly persons, or children.<sup>106</sup> As such, “helping the people” both presupposes separability between state and society and imbues these realms with hierarchically-organized power. The language of helping, therefore, serves also an ideological function, to mask a project to expand bureaucratic power as helpful while, simultaneously, inculcating perceptions of helplessness among certain kinds of people.<sup>107</sup> Just as the DRV expanded territorially, its cadres also worked to enlarge and intensify their own capacity to regulate the means and ends of agrarian production, supposedly, on behalf of Others.

The regional Party Commissar’s reflections demonstrate that emergent processes of “mobilization” were caught up in larger relations of state, economy, and society. Loosing labor and foodstuffs from local producers was embedded in modes of exchange which, in turn, were part of a broader program to institutionalize and legitimize DRV power. Failure to reciprocate state claims risked not only a project to remake human and material resources into a “reserve force” necessary to feed and equip a growing regular army. Such failure also risked an evolving relationship between the DRV and subjects over which it claimed benevolent rule. Used to legitimize the expansion of state authority, the political function of helping applied as well to ideas of improvement and development. The rising state reserved the leadership of and apportioned to itself the power to transform society. With these ideas in mind and on their lips, cadres set about to remake the frontier’s economy in 1953, to construct a reserve for the military’s demands.

### ***Development, production, and (re)emergent relations of exchange***

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<sup>106</sup> Đặng Chấn Liêu et al (2001), 634.

<sup>107</sup> Michael Dove, “A Revisionist View of Tropical Deforestation and Development,” *Environmental Conservation* 20 (1993), 17; Murray Edelman, “The Political Language of the Helping Professions,” *Politics & Society* 4 (1974), 305.

Although the Labor Party's 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum in January 1953 initiated Mass Mobilization for Land Reform elsewhere in DRV territory, redistributing land was not a Central Government priority in its Northwest region. As discussed in the previous chapter, the center's decisions stimulated debate, and exposed splits between, cadres and emerging institutions charged with interpreting mass mobilization. It appears that warfare remained the center's higher priority. Although the Northwest Campaign ended formally on 10 December 1952, combat continued through 1953 with French and Federation forces on multiple fronts criss-crossing the Black River region: west into Laos (March-April), south at the fortified base in Nà Sản (until August), and north to the Thái Federation at Lai Châu (until December); and then, all over again, at Điện Biên Phủ (beginning in November).

Eventually, according to reports in March and April 1953, the Zone's political leadership settled on a revised interpretation of the Party's 4<sup>th</sup> Plenum: to emphasize military struggle by enacting state claims on labor and produce *and* to restore agricultural production by increasing its productivity and distributing capital and consumption goods. "The Center's plan for production and economizing," stated the Northwest's Administrative Committee, "aims to guarantee levels of cereal production that are enough to eat, enough to fight the bandits, enough to prevent hunger."<sup>108</sup> These goals did not depart from, but rather rearticulated, previous and ongoing practices. On the one hand, regional leaders claimed provisions and local labor power to support the military effort. On the other, they stimulated local production in order to increase any potential agrarian "surplus" available for claiming; and regulated economic relations within an emerging, nationally-bounded system of exchange.

In early 1953, the Black River region's economy was precarious: labor supply

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<sup>108</sup> Anon., "Cùng cố..." 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 2; Nguyễn Kháng, Đảng LĐVN, Ban Chấp hành Khu XX, "Báo cáo kiểm điểm chương trình công tác tháng 12/52 và 1/1953 vùng mới giải phóng," 11 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471.

was already limited and its productive capacity unevenly distributed. Any manpower allocated to the military effort reduced scarce labor available for agrarian production. Furthermore, warfare's legacy and ongoing practice rendered much of the landscape unproductive, in need of additional labor power to restore abandoned wet-rice and swidden fields. Regional production and material exchange were spatially uneven. In free zones, the masses were "relatively well-off" and "able to develop": Yên Bái, for example, became a site of farmtool manufacture. Recently liberated zones, by contrast, suffered severely from recent and ongoing combat: agricultural land in Sơn La and Phú Yên, for example, lay fallow and farmers lacked capital to work it.<sup>109</sup>

How did the regional leadership propose to resolve a potential contradiction between making war and making food? Just as Phạm Văn Đồng had warned in mid-1952, increasing support for the resistance reduced labor available for agricultural production. In much the same way that the Vice Prime Minister proposed not one or the other but to do both better, the Northwest Zone's leadership proposed to integrate the mobilization of agrarian resources with a movement to boost production through rational regulation and planned improvement. The Zone's political leadership articulated a new agenda for "development" (*sự phát triển*) oriented towards increasing output *and* supporting the military agenda. To restore and increase production across the region, the Zone's Administrative Committee instructed cadres to lead a charge towards development, to "enhance livelihoods in free zones" and to "improve the livelihoods of people in newly liberated zones."<sup>110</sup> In other words, cadres were to advocate, generate, and demonstrate progress through state intervention in agriculture and (limited) transformation of rural society. Notwithstanding all their efforts to do so, the potential contradiction did not go away but, actually, grew into a

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<sup>109</sup> Anon., "Củng cố..." 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 2-3.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2, 8.

real contradiction—with unintended, costly, and spatially uneven results.

The idea of development must have appealed to a peasantry long accustomed to shortage, frequently unable to claim their own labor power, and often frustrated in attempts to access land resources. Yet, given the restrictions placed on agrarian reform—allowing unequal social relations of land and labor to persist—how did cadres “improve” rural livelihoods? Who benefited and who bore the cost of changing relations of production and exchange? How did “development” fit into the larger state agenda for the Northwest Zone?

The Northwest Administrative Committee explicitly conceived of “development” as an “ideology” (*tư tưởng*) to be deployed in territories where it aimed both to establish legitimate power and to make claims. Development was at once an agrarian agenda and a self-conscious ideological project, a set of ideas to be cultivated among cadres and peasants alike. Higher echelon cadres attached to the Party Committee, for example, were required “to make [subordinate] cadres understand clearly the importance of improving the people’s lives” in order to “lead thought” (*lãnh đạo tư tưởng*) among the people.<sup>111</sup> To become leaders of ideology, agents of state re-presented a project designed to intensify state claims on society, reshape the means of production, and extract a share. The ideology of development was a means of representing a powerful project—to expand and intensify state power—to, and among, a population now included in DRV territory. As with any attempt at gaining ideological hegemony, however, this project was incomplete, conflicted, and contested.

In particular, cadres were ordered to deploy this ideology to legitimate projects for transforming agriculture and reforming regional finances. Like the emulation model used by the military to transmit collective forms and ideals of service, cadres

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<sup>111</sup> Anon., “Cùng cố...” 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 8.

organized farmers into mass organizations and pointed to them as “paragons” (*giương mẫu*) of new modes of agricultural practice.<sup>112</sup> Organizing workteams (*tổ sản xuất*) by economic sector, such as weaving cloth and cultivating swiddens, aimed to increase labor efficiency and, furthermore, provided a site for disseminating plans and justifications for mobilizing resources for war.<sup>113</sup> Each team sent representatives to attend “production conferences” where participants learned (or, became “enthusiastic”) about policy priorities and, in particular, the practices and goals of mobilization. At the same time, cadres used these conferences to gather knowledge about local production capacities, i.e. what surplus was available for redistribution and military consumption.<sup>114</sup>

Boosting production was never intended, simply, to provide more food for local consumption. More and more, cadres cajoled peasants to increase output in order to supply increasing state demands. Cadres instructed them to plant vegetable gardens “in order to eat and to sell a portion to the army.” Improving the quantity and quality of livestock was a priority to “produce enough meat to eat and to supply the army.”<sup>115</sup> The logic and language of progress structured both a political economic project to increase production and, simultaneously, an ideological agenda to justify state claims on any resulting increase.

Taxation and exchange were central to state efforts to transform agriculture and reform the accounting of state claims. Implementing and expanding the agricultural tax fed statist ambitions to know society, to rationalize institutional coffers, and to collect military provisions. The agricultural tax was most fully collected in “free zones” where DRV territorial control was more secure, and

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<sup>112</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 11 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p.10.

<sup>115</sup> Anon., “Cùng cố...” 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 3-4.

ideological hegemony more stable. Cadres there were ordered to “make the people understand clearly that they need to boost production not only to serve their own private needs but also to help the economies of newly liberated zones recover.”<sup>116</sup> Areas such as eastern Yên Bái and Lào Cai sent livestock and seedstock west to subsidize reconstruction.<sup>117</sup> In newly liberated zones of western Yên Bái and Sơn La, cadres had to educate farmers, “from the moment of planting to harvest time,” that producing for one’s own needs now required “contributing one part to the resistance” and preparing for taxation in 1953.<sup>118</sup> To set the tax in motion required educating farmers to believe, first, that their production was not merely their own and, second, that any increases were due, and belonged, to the DRV. Taxation was part and parcel to ongoing efforts not only to legitimize state claims but also to rationalize them and, more broadly, to recentralize power relations.<sup>119</sup>

The material and ideological project of development was simultaneously an understanding and a misunderstanding of how DRV claims worked in practice.<sup>120</sup> On the one hand, cadres were instructed to embody “solicitous care” towards the population and their livelihoods, helping to construct an idea of state as “helping” the people. On the other hand, any tangible increases in the people’s material welfare did not belong entirely to them. Labor mobilization and agricultural taxation always lurked in development’s shadow.

Throughout the contested territory of “Vietnam,” the agricultural tax was subject of conflicting and competing representations, indicating the contested politics surrounding claims to agrarian production. Just as the DRV legitimated taxation as a

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3-4.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>119</sup> For Max Weber, taxation exemplifies processes of financial rationalization, itself a hallmark of rational bureaucratic administration. Cf., “Bureaucracy” (1978), 956-1005.

<sup>120</sup> Philip Abrams, “Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State,” *Historical Sociology*, 1 (1988), 15; Corrigan & Sayer (1985), 8.

form of “contribution,” the French-supported (Associated) State of Vietnam attacked this policy and offered alternative understandings. “Because of the agricultural tax,” read one bulletin, “compatriots in Việt-Minh areas are stressed all year, but are still hungry.” Another bulletin claimed that between taxation and military provisioning, the “communists” took 90% of a given farmer’s produce. A cartoon illustrated taxation in a damning circular progression: from rice to DRV flag to weapons to fighting and, ultimately, to burning villages; at the center is a play on Hồ Chí Minh’s statement (“there is nothing more precious than independence and freedom”), reading, “There is nothing strange here at all, because you have killed yourself!” Notwithstanding the illustration’s lack of subtlety, the text was in keeping with traditions of Vietnamese political satire, involving complex wordplay and multiple interpretations.<sup>121</sup> Although it is unclear whether these counter-representations reached a Black River audience, they nonetheless indicate that the DRV agenda did not go uncontested.

Within the contested territory of the “Northwest,” cadres had exhorted peasants to “loan” rice and foodstuffs to the People’s Army during the late 1952 military campaign. In spring 1953, the Northwest Administrative Committee now worked to balance its coffers and it did so, in line with Central Government guidelines, through providing goods, like salt and farmtools, to amortize accumulated debt.<sup>122</sup> Ironically, this system was aptly described in “counter-propaganda,” by purveyors of alleged *misinformation*. “The Việt Minh,” went a line by alleged spies and reactionaries, “fooled the people before when borrowing rice in exchange for future salt; now they sell salt and take money.” Such “counterpropaganda” led the people to suspect “us” (*ta*), continued a Northwest Party Committee report, and increased the ability of the

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<sup>121</sup> “Tài liệu của địch tuyên truyền về công tác cuộc cải cách điền địa do Thủ tướng bù nhìn Nguyễn Văn Tâm chủ trương và xuyên tạc chính sách phát động quần chúng của ta năm 1953,” 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1394.

<sup>122</sup> Anon., “Cùng cố...” 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 7-8.

enemy to “win over” the people.<sup>123</sup> Such collective (mis)representations underlined just how important the work of legitimating exchange was to enabling, or disabling, the circulation of materials and loyalties.

Just as the “counterpropaganda” alleged, a growing network of State Shops did sell goods, albeit at subsidized prices. To meet popular demands, State Shops (*Mậu dịch quốc doanh*) were charged with trading commodities. To meet state demands, they collected local agrarian produce and exchanged Indochinese piastres for DRV *đồng*. In addition to capital goods such as sickles, knives, and seedstock, the shops supervised the distribution of consumption goods such as tobacco, cloth, and salt. Traders (*thương nhân*) worked with State Shops to reach out of the way places.<sup>124</sup> State Shops fulfilled larger policy guidelines regulating the movement of material goods into the region. Central and Regional leaders agreed “not to provide rice but most essentially to provide tools,” explaining that rice could not be provided “in time” but, with knives and spades, “compatriots” could dig for forest tubers, open swidden fields, and expand wet-rice cultivation.<sup>125</sup> One might well ask, “in time” for what? The answer became clear over the next several months. Meanwhile, the emphasis on agricultural tools fit a logic of militarized development, to increase production for increasing consumption by providing capital goods.

If providing tools fit developmentalist logic, then why provide goods for immediate consumption, such as salt, tobacco, and cloth? Like the 1940s, salt provides an analytical clue as to the priority attached to legitimation work. A representative on the Northwest’s Administrative Committee explained simply: “With salt, the people

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<sup>123</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 11 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 2.

<sup>124</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 10.

<sup>125</sup> Quảng Văn Đức, “Kiểm điểm thực hiện chính sách dân tộc thiểu số qua công tác chống đói,” July 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Khu tự trị Tây Bắc, file no. 2756, p. 2.



say, ‘By having great-grandfather Hồ, only now do we have salt to eat.’”<sup>126</sup> Great-grandfather (*cụ*) is an honorific title referring to President Hồ Chí Minh. “The work had results, the policy guidelines were correct,” explained the representative, because they “were able to produce good influence.”<sup>127</sup> By work, he means legitimization activities. By influence, he means their political effect.

Given its political significance, the delivery of salt remained a high priority. After the initial shipment of 45 tons in October - November 1952, Nghĩa Lộ and Than Uyên received in December 1952 - January 1953 another 70 tons; of the latter total, State Shops delivered 42 tons and independent traders 28 tons. In sum, Yên Bái received 115 tons of salt between October 1952 – January 1953. Over this same four month period, by contrast, the amount of salt reaching Sơn La did not increase but may have actually decreased: the earlier estimate of 45 tons was revised down to 35 tons in one report and back up to 46 tons in another. Salt supply in Lai Châu was even more uncertain. Of the six tons “only just now moving” in late December 1952 in Quỳnh Nhai and intended for Lai Châu, 5 tons had “only just arrived” in Điện Biên in February 1953; meanwhile, Tuần Giáo was slated to receive salt moving not eastward from the Red River delta but westward from Laos. Inspections in Lai Châu reported what turned out to be rumors: that independent traders were moving 24 tons more salt to Điện Biên and another 24 tons “on its way” to Lai Châu as of January; a report from February indicates that only the initial 5 tons had actually arrived. Phong Thổ, located in western Lào Cai on the eastern edge of remaining Thái Federation territory, received 3 tons salt as of February 1953.<sup>128</sup>

If salt’s delivery was problematic, its distribution was even more so. By

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<sup>126</sup> Or, “Có cụ Hồ ta mới có muối để ăn.” It is unclear whether this was a propaganda line, an expression of gratitude, or both. *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 11 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 3; ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6.

February 1953, people in newly liberated areas were “very short of salt.” Within these overall conditions, however, there was a re-emergent spatial pattern. On the one hand, people in Nghĩa Lộ, Phù Yên, and Mộc Châu “had relatively enough salt to eat.” These locations were on the Northwest Zone’s eastern reaches, closer to downstream sources. On the other hand, “all other districts, especially [those in] Lai Châu still are very lacking.” These locations were on the Northwest Zone’s western reaches, closer to Laos and farther from downstream sources.<sup>129</sup>

The last available report on salt’s delivery and distribution comes from mid-April 1953 and confirms these emergent patterns as well as their political effect. By then, Yên Bái had received a total of 160 tons salt (45 since January); Sơn La 82 tons total (47 or 36 since January); Lai Châu 7 tons total (2 since January); and Phong Thổ 4 tons (1 since January). If the rate of transportation had increased 30% in February - March 1953 compared with previous months, any improvement was a drop in the bucket. “Presently,” observed Nguyễn Khánh, “those close places have relatively enough salt to eat but those far places like Lai Châu and all districts in northern Sơn La are still very short.” The descriptors “close” and “far” are spatial referents posed in relation to the Việt Bắc, i.e. the emergent center of material and symbolic power. Evidently, the Laos Campaign had altered supply networks yet again: somewhere else in Lai Châu was now a point of distribution for Quỳnh Nhai (and not the other way around) and Tuần Giáo no longer, or never had, received shipments from Laos. Not only was salt’s distribution in “far” regions of Lai Châu and Sơn La insufficient, its movement was constantly disrupted. The political ramifications of these emergent patterns were clear. “Any place where salt has been distributed to the people, the people ebulliently welcome, and are fully confident in, the Government and trust the cadres,” wrote Nguyễn Khánh. “By contrast,” he continued, “any place where salt has

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<sup>129</sup> ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6.

yet to arrive, the people are often anxious (*thắc mắc*) and short of confidence.”<sup>130</sup>

Salt indicated emergent political and economic relations, its uneven distribution reflecting and shaping (lack of) legitimacy for the DRV and its agents. Like the 1940s, salt in 1952-1953 rendered an abstract and symbolic relationship between the DRV and real or potential subject populations concrete and material. Salt contributed tangibly to constructing an idea of “the state” that was personified as caring and helpful; and a mirror-like idea of “the people” who were undifferentiated as trusting, grateful, and welcoming. In practice, however, the intended political effect of salt’s presence was accompanied by an unintended, dialectical opposite: salt’s absence delegitimized the DRV’s power and intent.

The spread of capital goods such as spades, water buffalo, and seedstock tracked salt’s uneven distribution and, presumably, produced a similarly differential social effect. Although parts of Sơn La and Yên Bái had “relatively enough” to produce agriculturally, “the areas of worst shortages are northern Sơn La and Lai Châu; and Hmong and Dao areas in Văn Chấn, Than Uyên, and Phù Yên.”<sup>131</sup> This observation adds topography to otherwise flat spatial patterns. Even within “close” areas of Yên Bái were ethnically-coded, geographically-specific disparities: evidently, Thái *muang* communities received more and upland non-Thái communities less. The spatial and social patterns indicate an emergent system of exchange bounded by, and regulated by the DRV within, an emergent “national” territory differentiated internally according to its own ranked categorization of “ethnic minorities.”

If salt had its own unique political value, the commodity also serves as an indicator of emergent relations of exchange, nodes of which were the State Shops. In

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<sup>130</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 13.

<sup>131</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 10.

addition to amassing and exchanging consumption and capital goods, State Shops used DRV money (*đồng*) with the intent of changing currency over from Indochinese piasters. Like other elements in an evolving system of exchange regulated within and as national space, DRV currency and exchange programs unfolded unevenly in place and with unintended effects.

Just as the spread of salt and farmtools had spatial disparities, so too did the DRV's ability to collect old piastres and substitute them for *đồng*. As of February 1953, cadres had changed money in three districts of Yên Bái (Nghĩa Lộ, Than Uyên, Văn Bàn), yielding a total of 1.5 million piastres; and in four districts of Sơn La yielding half a million piastres, of which Phù Yên district accounted for the largest share (380,000). Elsewhere in Sơn La monetary substitution stalled: residents of Mường La and Yên Châu continued to hold onto old currency because, should the "enemy" return, they worried about being short on cash; and there was no currency exchange at all in Mai Sơn and Sông Mã because these districts were "short on specialized cadres."<sup>132</sup>

What few data are reported suggests that the currency program elicited a spatially continuous response overlapping with material exchange: stronger in areas closer to the Việt Bắc and weaker towards the west and the Lao frontier. Not surprisingly, currency exchange was weakest where less salt and farmtools were available: together, their effect contributed towards a lack of faith in the DRV's anticipated, self-proclaimed "certain victory." Note, however, that these are only the places where currency exchange had *already* happened. Although the data are not complete nor are they reported on subsequently, most of the Northwest Zone's districts appeared to have no exchange program at all. Like the districts and underlying communes whose leaders carried over from the Thái Federation, the

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<sup>132</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 11 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 4.

medium of exchange appeared to remain the Indochinese piaster.

Notwithstanding the limited spread of the Vietnamese *đồng*, its use was significant as a means of accounting and exchange by DRV institutions. All tax receipts were reported in *đồng* and grains collected as tax were converted into *đồng* equivalents.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, State Shops bought and sold commodities in *đồng*-based prices. In spite of official efforts to maintain price stability, inflation increased over the course of 1953, complicating efforts to regulate exchange in and for the new currency. In Lào Cai, for example, officials attempted to maintain price parity predicated on salt as the baseline, where: 1 unit salt (kg) = 9 units (kg) rice and 1 unit (meter) cloth = 7 units (kg) rice. Yet as the time from the fall harvest increased, so too did the price of locally-produced rice, outstripping any comparable inflation in salt. In Yên Bái, the price of rice quadrupled over two months of Jan-Feb 1953 (from 950 to 4680 đ/kg) while that of salt rose only marginally (from 14,000 to 15,000 đ/kg).<sup>134</sup> Two months later, by mid-April, rice's price had continued to rise: up to 5,600 đ/kg in Yên Bái; and from 2,800 to 4,500 đ/kg in Lào Cai. To the west, prices were more stable but still high: Quỳnh Nhai and Tuần Giáo from 4,000-4,500 đ/kg; in Sơn La pegged at 5,000 đ/kg; the only exception was Điện Biên where the relatively low price of rice (1,500 đ/kg) was testament to its prodigious agricultural output and, perhaps, lower military demand.<sup>135</sup> If salt remained per unit more valuable than rice, the latter's increasing scarcity led broader price inflation. Unbeknownst to state accountants and planners at the time, rice's rapid price inflation pointed to regional grain shortage.

Monetary payments were not meant to substitute fully for barter in kind. In exchange for providing scarce commodities, State Shops collected opium, among other so-called "local forest products" (*lâm thổ sản*). Indeed, the Party's Ethnic Policy

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.* p. 12.

<sup>134</sup> ĐLĐVN, "Báo cáo..." 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 10.

<sup>135</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, "Báo cáo..." 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 12.

stated this priority clearly: “State Shops must prepare goods for sale and exchange, especially salt, cloth, farm tools; and to collect forest products.” Opium was the most valuable of these “forest products” and the Policy forbade any efforts to “prohibit, confiscate, or buy cheap the people’s planted opium.”<sup>136</sup> In other words, opium was a valuable commodity and, like salt, its exchange value was politically elastic.

Although Phan Mỹ noted in late December 1952 that the collection of forest products was only a trickle, later reports revealed a torrent in the east and a blockage in the west.<sup>137</sup> For year 1952, State Shops in free zones of Yên Bái collected 48 tons of cinnamon. In year 1952 in Lào Cai province alone, the State Shop collected an enormous 1.395 billion *đồng* worth of vaguely-specified (but most likely opium) “forest products”; for comparison, the total 1952 amount of credit the State Bank loaned out to the province’s residents was only 200 million *đồng*, or 1/7<sup>th</sup> this one stated form of revenue.<sup>138</sup> Yet State Shops in “newly liberated zones,” i.e. Lai Châu and Sơn La, fared far worse: in spite of popular interest and willingness to trade tea, cotton, cinnamon, and other “local forest products” for money, salt, or farmtools, State Shops there were “unable to collect anything” in 1952 and for the first three months of 1953.<sup>139</sup> Notwithstanding this institutional failure, popular desire for trade, and state regulations encouraging its regulation and stimulation, all remained strong. In another report on the region’s economy and finances—stamped “secret”—cadres were “encouraged to organize the people to exploit forest products like opium, cinnamon, cardamom, etc...” In the margin next to this order, a reader added in ink: “push hard” (*đẩy mạnh*) and, next to another similar order, “important.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư thi hành chính sách dân tộc thiểu số ở Khu QT,” 16 Aug 1952, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 13, yr 1952 (2001), 254.

<sup>137</sup> Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược...” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 8.

<sup>138</sup> ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 9.

<sup>139</sup> Nguyễn Kháng, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 11.

<sup>140</sup> Anon., “Cùng cố...” 12 Mar 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 472, p. 3, 4.

This state-led barter and trade, buying and selling was intended to absorb all forms of exchange, with force if necessary. State Shops supplied itinerant traders with commodities and monitored their prices. They also forbade smuggling and encouraged traders to embrace an ethic of “contribution.”<sup>141</sup> Should traders or anyone else attempt to trade outside approved channels, they became the responsibility of the Northwest Zone Police (*Công an Khu*). Just as the State Shop positioned itself at the center of emerging material exchange in the Northwest Zone, the police enforced their monopoly claim to trade there. In April 1953, Nguyễn Khánh reported on two forms of “illegitimate” (*không chính đáng*) trade, one in piastres and another in opium; police and customs agents were investigating.<sup>142</sup> Likewise, a plan originally designed to patrol for spies by monitoring boat traffic on the Red River served also a dual regulatory function. The Zone Police interdicted “smuggling” (*buôn lậu*) activities, or unlawful exchange, oriented along the cross border, upstream / downstream axis.<sup>143</sup> As discussed below, the police also enforced compliance with *dân công* duties.

### ***Cycles of labor and hunger***

State claims on labor and produce continued through 1953 just as the zone of recruitment expanded steadily westwards. As of January 1953 cadres had already “mobilized” from the Northwest Zone both 16,421 laborers to serve “the front” as well as 1,396 tons of locally-produced rice. The tonnage of rice added to another 789 tons collected by 10 December 1952.<sup>144</sup> Which front is unclear but it is likely these laborers

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6; Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 12-13.

<sup>142</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 12.

<sup>143</sup> Thủ Bộ Công an, Công an Khu Tây Bắc, “Kiểm soát trên sông để phóng biệt kích,” 1 July 1953, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2350, p. 1.

<sup>144</sup> Lê Trung Đình, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 2-3; Đảng LĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 4. Cf., Cẩm Trọng, *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1978), 542-543.

served and their rice fed ongoing combat at Nà Sản. Where they came from is also underspecified but it is likely that many laborers and much of the rice came from newly liberated zones in Lai Châu, Sơn La, portions of Yên Bái (Văn Chấn, Thanh Uyên), and Lào Cai (Phong Thổ).

Although these statistics on labor “mobilization” indicate more or less when they served, roughly how many participated, describe generally what they did, and locate approximately from where they came, the data leave much to be desired. Indeed, archival sources for 1952-1953 and beyond leave many questions unanswered. From which communities, and where exactly, did *dân công* laborers come? How long did each laborer serve? How did the process of recruitment work locally? Why did anyone participate? Based on gaps and conflicts in available data, I have argued that regional authorities themselves did not fully know the answers to these questions. Growing awareness of their own ignorance stimulated a process of state learning and, as a result, answers to some of these questions became more available, and archivally locable, during the November 1953 to May 1954 Điện Biên Phủ Campaign.

What does become clear during this period in early to mid-1953 are four inter-related facts. Peasants did not always comply voluntarily with obligations. Agents of state sometimes used coercion to force compliance. Working as a *dân công* was onerous and increasingly unpopular. Providing labor and food to the military bore increasingly severe local consequences.

In a report resulting from a Cadre Conference held between 22-27 February 1953, the Northwest Party Committee first aired problems encountered in “mobilizing *dân công*.” What they described as “bad points” (*khuyết điểm*) included a number of failures: to meet time-based and numerical targets, “not yet” fulfilling policy guidelines (i.e., breaking what stood for law), unequal service, and “burdensome



feelings” (i.e., legitimation problems).<sup>145</sup> As evidentiary support, the report cited a number of telling examples from the Northwest Zone’s free zones in eastern Lào Cai and Yên Bái. When these problems occurred is unclear (i.e., during the past campaign in late 1952 or during ongoing combat in early 1953?) but when they reported them is significant. That Party cadres first discussed these problems and then the Committee reported their findings in late February 1953 indicates a growing awareness, and willingness to reveal to superiors, complex and unresolved issues associated with labor recruitment. In short, broaching these concerns appeared to open a space for subsequent official reporters to air more problems and, in his report of mid-April 1953, Nguyễn Kháng described a litany.

The Committee’s February report cited examples from Lào Cai and Yên Bái of improper oversight, counterpropaganda, ongoing coercion, and widespread avoidance. In Trấn Yên, a commune representative did not accompany *dân công* laborers to the front nor were there enough Party members to oversee communes. Recall that one member of each commune committee was charged with military logistics and supply; Party members (i.e., Kinh representatives on these committees) were supposed to, but evidently did not, monitor their local peers. Use of labor was “wasteful” (*lãng phí*), perhaps a veiled reference to use of “people’s laborers” improperly for pet projects or personal gain. Education in *dân công* policy was not “decisive,” leading people to “still avoid” labor service; in Văn Bàn “traitors” disrupted meetings by calling on people to “skip” service. These are failures in legitimation work as well as indications of alternative norms structuring labor allocation. Moreover, in contrast to their stated role, cadres did not sufficiently “attend solicitously to the livelihoods and health of *dân công*.” Worse, in “many a places” in Lào Cai, cadres “still beat up *dân công*.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 3.

<sup>146</sup> Or, “...đòi nơi còn đánh đập dân công.” ĐLĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 3.

That these beatings occurred in many places is alarming enough. Moreover, that cadres *still* resorted to coercive measures indicates that use of force was routine and ongoing. All these problems, the Committee concluded, had led 902 persons out of 3,785 *dân công* in Yên Bái to “hide out” during “wave 1” and avoid service; that over one-quarter of targeted laborers did not show up for work “caused problems transporting grains to the front for the military.”<sup>147</sup>

That the assessment ends with acknowledging a failure to provision once again indicates an official priority attached to making war. Underlying this assessment, moreover, was a growing awareness of institutional failures to justify and regulate state claims on peasant labor; and a corresponding response among peasants to contest and avoid recruitment. Although when these problems occurred is unclear, they were clearly part of a larger trend: *dân công* service was unpopular and emerging state institutions used not only legitimation to attract laborers but also coercion to enforce their compliance. In July 1953, in addition to finding and punishing smugglers plying the Red River route, the regional police force also found nestled in its banks the hideouts of people avoiding state claims on their labor. “Gangs of *dân công*” used the riverbank’s thickets, reported the Zone’s Police Chief, “to hide from their duties to the resistance.”<sup>148</sup> The Chief of Police was wrong about these people: they were not *dân công* nor did they want to be treated as such.

Nguyễn Kháng’s mid-April report revealed that people all over the Northwest complained of worsening inequities in *dân công* duties and recruitment, i.e. that not all citizens performed their share equally.<sup>149</sup> Worse still, working as a *dân công* portended danger for one’s self as well as for one’s family. Not only did such work mean departing from farm and neglecting household production, it also risked one’s own

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> Thu Bộ Công an, “Kiểm soát...” 1 Jul 1953, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2350, p. 1.

<sup>149</sup> Nguyễn Kháng, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 5-6

health and wellbeing. These costs were not born evenly: rather, in addition to following class and status inequities, dangers mapped onto an emerging spatial pattern. Unsanitary conditions on the road and exhaustion from arduous work contributed to communicable disease among *dân công* laborers: although Yên Bái had several clinics to treat and inoculate them, Sơn La and Lai Châu did not have comparable health “infrastructure” and the few nurses there performed duties in sub-par fashion. Farmers in free zones of Yên Bái and Lào Cai expressed interest in establishing time-limits on service so that they could “put their minds to rest and make a living.” Meanwhile, residents of recently liberated zones in Lai Châu and Sơn La were “anxious,” complained of *dân công* duties, and “still fled” when asked to work on roadcrews or to transport salt and farmtools. Worst of all, in these latter areas there was increasingly widespread hunger and, even, scattered starvation.<sup>150</sup>

What accounts for these observed problems of labor recruitment? Nguyễn Khánh ventured one explanation based on emerging patterns of exchange and their spatial unevenness. He described how the Zone’s Administrative Committee was unable to meet the material needs of its own population: salt and farmtools remained scarce, especially in Sơn La and Lai Châu. In terms of their production effect, the lack of spades limited farmers’ ability to reopen fallow land and contributed to spreading food shortages. In terms of their ideological effect, ongoing shortages of salt and farmtools and resentment towards labor practices tracked one another: no longer “enthusiastic,” peasants in these western reaches had become “anxious” and “insufficiently believed in the Government and cadres.”<sup>151</sup>

I interpret this first explanation as a breakdown in exchange relations. As 1953 wore on, the DRV failed to reciprocate locally gathered labor and food resources. Not

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p. 5-6, 14.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6, 18.

without his protest and advocacy to the contrary, Nguyễn Kháng was describing early stages in an historic shift in state claim-making practices, from an emphasis on reciprocal exchange to intensive mobilization. If the former was more voluntaristic and predicated on successfully legitimating power as authority, the latter was less voluntaristic and predicated more on coercive institutional power. His observation of spatial unevenness maps onto emergent spatial categories: rear and front structured provisioning practices and labor recruitment particularly and exchange relations generally between People's Army, DRV institutions, and Black River peasantry.

Another explanation, somewhat speculative, also suggests itself.

Notwithstanding the mention of Hmong women inspired to assist the military in late 1952, in 1952-53 it appears as though *dân công* labor service was largely concentrated in Thái communities. Only in late 1953 and through 1954 does evidence support the inclusion of highland peoples more broadly, a topic discussed in the following chapter. Therefore, what went unsaid in the Zonal Political Commissar's analysis were deeper problems in legitimating and institutionalizing old Thái relations of rule in new form and practices of labor recruitment embedded in both. Recall that the majority of DRV officials in most locations of the Northwest were, in fact, former Thái Federation officials. As such, they had been accustomed to impressing *corvée* (*bắt phu*) under Federation rule, particularly for roadwork. Recall also that their district and commune bailiwicks built on and reproduced hierarchical social relations specific to the *muang* spatial unit. As such, officialized Thái lords were also accustomed to older—and still ongoing—patterns of bonded labor (*cuông nhuật*). For Kinh cadres, describing fine distinctions between “people's labor” in terms of national citizenship duties in contrast to officially abolished practices of colonial *corvée* or feudal bondage presented a forbiddingly complex problem of translation and interpretation. Although linguistic barriers were an acknowledged problem of legitimation work, any explanation in any

language aimed at justifying labor recruitment must have appeared superfluous. If rulers and ruled were the same people in the same places, then it is hard to imagine that local practices of labor recruitment changed substantially.

In this light, providing material or consumption goods might be seen as compensation to poor Thái peasants expected to submit to reproduced relations of domination. Poor peasants who had greeted liberation with enthusiasm found their aspirations for land reform denied by central and regional officials; even more modest attempts at agrarian reform, such as rent control, were subverted by officialized lords. Once again, in addition to traditional power, Thái lords enjoyed renewed bureaucratic power—backed with formidable force—to claim local labor. What changed with DRV rule was the addition of Kinh officials to a local bureaucracy: their task was to direct respective communes to meet urgent quotas levied by senior Kinh military officers and civilian officials. Just as traditional and bureaucratic authority merged in a powerful hybrid form, so too did the combination of substantive and formal rationality produce powerful hybrid norms and expectations predicated on techniques of calculation.<sup>152</sup> If anything, the rationalization of labor recruitment meant more far-reaching and increasingly intensified labor obligations, not less. For poor Thái peasants subject to re-emerging and reinforced relations of domination, the *dân công* program must have appeared like old wine overflowing new bottles. Once again, they were called on, or forced, to build and rebuild roads.

In spring 1953, just as the area of recruitment expanded westward, *dân công* duties for local laborers extended beyond pedestrian transportation and military support to include road work. On 2 April 1953, 4,000 *dân công* were “mobilized” in Yên Bái and another 4,000 in Sơn La: they joined 3,000 laborers from the delta

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<sup>152</sup> Weber (1978), 85-86, 108.

province of Vĩnh Phúc (supplied by the military's General Department of Front Supply); and supplemented the ranks of still another 2,000 local laborers already working on the Northwest's road network. Ironically, these 13,000 *dân công* laborers repaired the very same roads that guerillas had sabotaged several years earlier.<sup>153</sup>

In June, still more local and extralocal *dân công* laborers were called on to “serve” and continue work on roadcrews.<sup>154</sup> Central DRV, Party, and military leaders wanted to restore bridges and rebuild routes in order to facilitate traffic along the winding road network linking the Việt Bắc and Northwest Zones. Calling this “the bridges and roads campaign,” the Academy of Military History states that “several dozen tens of thousands of *dân công*” were “mobilized” from provinces throughout Vietnam's (contested) northern salient, or Tonkin.<sup>155</sup> “Human resources,” the official military history continues, “that plentiful energy of the rear, were all maximally mobilized in preparation for winter-spring's large strike.”<sup>156</sup> The areas from which these roadcrews were mobilized—the Northwest, Việt Bắc, as well as Interzones 3 and 4—were the same ones that, later, would supply the still more demanding and onerous Điện Biên Phủ Campaign.<sup>157</sup>

Although the specific military plans for the coming winter-spring offensive were approved only later, in October, the Academy's history claims that preparations (i.e., labor mobilization and roadwork) were not only ongoing but had begun much earlier. The Academy's narrative finesses one problem but rehearses others that characterize many official and nationalist histories. For example, an author in the General Department of Supply's commemorative volume *Securing Logistics* writes:

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<sup>153</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 13-14.

<sup>154</sup> “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư về việc lãnh đạo công tác làm cầu đường giao thông vận tải,” 15 June 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (201), 243-245.

<sup>155</sup> Or, “hàng chục vạn dân công.” Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 263.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Interzone 3 included Red River Delta provinces and Interzone 4 Nghệ An and Thanh Hoá provinces.

with regards only to Road 13 and only to labor gleaned from this one province, Son La “contributed” 20,000 laborers working 2 million days—sometime after the Northwest Campaign and in “preparation” for the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign.<sup>158</sup> If the Academy’s history is correct in observing that preparation for the winter-spring campaign was ongoing, then the General Department’s narrative frames the Điện Biên Phủ battle teleologically: whether April or June 1953, neither French nor Vietnamese leaders knew that the battle would be located there.<sup>159</sup> How could planners prepare for a particular event they did not yet know would happen?

This telos adds to a second problem with regards to tracking labor recruitment temporally and spatially. From where exactly did the Academy’s “several dozen tens of thousands of laborers” or the General Department’s 20,000 Son La road workers originate and when? Attending teleologically and disproportionately to the event itself—i.e. the battle—mystifies the historical processes of its making. Furthermore, the idea of “contributions” obscures questions of why and how peasants became state laborers. Such enumerative tendencies and ascribed voluntarism work to obfuscate opportunity costs of not working at home or in the fields.<sup>160</sup> The so-called “plentiful energy of the rear” was anything but abundant in the Black River region at *any* time.

Particularly at *this* time and in *this* place, moreover, food supplies and labor were desperately scarce. In April 1953, Nguyễn Khánh reported that, “hunger had

<sup>158</sup> Đỗ Hữu Lễ, “Quân và dân Tây Bắc với công tác bảo đảm hậu cần cho chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ,” in *Tổng cục Hậu cần* (2004), 229-230.

<sup>159</sup> As discussed earlier, the Navarre Plan was announced in July 1953 but its contents remained secret; only in September did DRV leaders become aware of its contents. Cf., Hoàng Văn Thái, *Cuộc tiến công chiến lược Đông Xuân 1953-1954* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1984), 27.

<sup>160</sup> Official and nationalist histories tend to omit this episode of post-liberation hunger altogether, either skipping directly from the Northwest to the Điện Biên Phủ Campaigns or describing how the earlier “victory” enabled an immediate turn-around in agricultural production and rates of consumption. Cf., Đỗ Hữu Lễ in *Tổng cục Hậu cần* (2004), 228; Cầm Trọng (1978), 542-545; Đặng Nghiêm Vạn & Đinh Xuân Lâm, *Điện Biên trong Lịch sử* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1979), 149-151; Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La, *Sơn La: Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1995); Ban Nghiên cứu Lịch sử Đảng bộ Lai Châu, *Ba Mươi năm Phấn đấu và xây dựng của Đảng bộ Lai Châu* (Lai Châu, 1980).

already appeared in many places.” In Sơn La, hunger affected an estimated 5,000 people in the districts of Mường La, Mộc Châu, and Phù Yên. At least five people died from starvation in Quang Huy commune, the same place where the Cầm clan was renewing familial rule with DRV backing.<sup>161</sup> More died elsewhere in Yên Bái.<sup>162</sup> Farmers in Tân Lập suffered multiple corn crop failures and residents of “several villages” in Mường La were wandering about, searching for anything to eat. In Lai Châu (Quỳnh Nhai, Tuần Giáo) and Yên Bái (Văn Chấn, Than Uyên), “all communes” inhabited by Hmong, Dao, and Khu Mu peoples were “also hungry” and, while waiting for their corn to mature, “only survived” by digging for forest tubers.<sup>163</sup> For all those who suffered or perished from hunger, any promise associated with development must have rung hollow.

Yet hunger and starvation did not just “appear” nor did it just “happen” as though without any causal influence from historical actors shaping and shaped by political and social forces.<sup>164</sup> Rather, food shortages were produced historically and its causes were, at least partially if not substantially, related to the mobilization program itself. Note that all of the affected districts were “rear” in relation to one or more “front”: Mường La and Mộc Châu were close to Nà Sản; Mộc Châu was a staging area for the cross-border offensive into Laos; Quỳnh Nhai and Tuần Giáo were proximate to remaining Thái Federation territory; Phù Yên, Than Uyên, and Văn Chấn were at the crossroads of soldiers moving to and from the Việt Bắc to serve on all three of

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<sup>161</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6.

<sup>162</sup> The total number dead from starvation is unclear. Another report states “nine people starved to death in Phù Yên and Mộc Châu” and “people at kilometer 15 in Hung Khanh, Tran Yen, Yên Bái starved to death.” Whether these deaths include the five above or not is also unclear. Le Trung Dinh, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 7.

<sup>163</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6.

<sup>164</sup> Reports and reporters often obscure authorship, particularly when reporting mistakes, by using a verb with a non-committal causal link and without an active subject. One states, “Presently, hunger has already appeared (*đã xuất hiện*)...” Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p. 6. Another reads, “After liberation, hunger happened (*xảy ra*) severely...” Le Trung Dinh, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 7.



these fronts.<sup>165</sup> Notwithstanding other proximate causes such as weather and pests, hunger was conspicuously present in “rear” areas of intensified provisioning and labor recruitment close to “front” areas of combat and military consumption. The dangers that mobilization for the “front” posed to non-combatants in the “rear” was spatially uneven, with hazards increasing with proximity to fighting. Even holding the danger of combat constant, the likelihood of suffering in the rear increased as distance to the front decreased.<sup>166</sup>

Like the Great Famine of 1945, who bore the blame for this episode of hunger—and under acknowledged starvation—in the Northwest was a politically significant and sensitive question. Nguyễn Khánh blamed prior colonial “exploitation.”<sup>167</sup> In May 1953, central Party leaders blamed hunger on the colonial legacy, natural disasters, and village-based feudalism.<sup>168</sup> Nowhere did any of them acknowledge their own complicity in reproducing feudal relations of rule or in snatching scarce resources away from producers. Rather, the Party insistently deflected blame from itself and redirected it towards nature, careless local peasants, and foreign occupiers.<sup>169</sup> A report on “hunger alleviation” from 1956 acknowledges earlier hunger but describes how adhering to an ultimately “correct” policy—i.e., distributing capital goods not food aid—tied official hands.<sup>170</sup> Nonetheless, Party leaders recognized the event’s political significance and positioned itself as uniquely

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<sup>165</sup> For more on the Lao Campaign and People’s Army movements in spring, 1953, cf., Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004a), 440-461; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam (2000), 411-423.

<sup>166</sup> General Giáp recalls that the French airforce also bombed supply lines moving to and from Laos, especially between Mộc Châu and Sam Neua (2004a), 460. Whether suffering French bombs or unintended effects of provisioning, warfare’s substantial impact on non-combatants is understudied.

<sup>167</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo 3...” 15 Apr 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, p.6

<sup>168</sup> “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư về phòng đói và cứu đói,” 12 June 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 207-208.

<sup>169</sup> “Drought and flood are one part caused by climate,” stated the Party order, “while another part is caused by forest destruction from opening swiddens carelessly.” *Ibid.* 208. In other words, Party leaders blamed the victims. Local reports do document droughts, floods, and landslides but, curiously, state that harvests actually increased. Đảng LĐVN, “Báo cáo...” 27 Feb 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 471, 8-9.

<sup>170</sup> Quảng Văn Đức, “Kiểm điểm...” July 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2756, p. 2

capable of solving the food shortage. They ordered the Zone's leadership to work with district and commune committees to "prioritize hunger prevention above all else" and underlined that, "hunger prevention and hunger relief *is important political work*."<sup>171</sup>

Hunger in this "newly liberated area" in 1953 differed from earlier episodes in several important respects. Unlike the 1945 experience in the Red River delta, a given cadre's self-identification as Kinh did not signal similarity with the local population but, rather, differentiated him. By and large, the newly arriving male cadres in the Northwest were not *of* these people: they grew up in the delta plains, dressed in shirts and trousers, spoke Vietnamese, farmed wet-rice, ate water spinach, etc. Communal recognition was predicated in terms of the national liberation project, the same one that was contributing so much to local suffering. Unlike the hunger of 1950, when Kinh guerilla fighters endured scarcity together with their local supporters, three years later many Kinh cadres clamored to quit this place and work somewhere else. As a result, using hunger as a cause to unify collectively against a grain-hording enemy was far more complicated: storehouses were no longer in the hands of some foreign "enemy" (be it Japanese or French) but, rather, belonged to a stated "friend," i.e. the grain-collecting, tax-assessing DRV. In short, hunger among Black River peoples in 1953 complicated legitimization work by further destabilizing the already uncertain categories of "friend" and "enemy."

Perhaps not surprisingly, central Party leaders proposed solutions to regional hunger either modest in scope or largely adhering to practices already in place: borrow rice from rich farmers, with force if necessary; draw on relief funds in rice storehouses (collected through the agricultural tax) to loan out rice; put people to work (in transportation, roadcrews, or irrigation repair) in exchange for payment in food;

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<sup>171</sup> Italics in original. "Chỉ thị..." 12 June 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol. 9, 1953 (2001), 207-208, 212.

collect forest products (through State Shops) in exchange for rice.<sup>172</sup> Note that they prescribed *more* off-farm labor programs to solve the same on-farm production shortages to which their own labor recruitment had contributed. Like so many other programs during this period, these efforts produced socially uneven results: “landlords did not loan out the proper amount,” perhaps indicating elite resistance to state-led redistribution programs; people with “means” were able to borrow emergency rice provisions while “poor people,” unable to repay these loans, were not granted privileges.<sup>173</sup>

Hunger relief was much like development, both of which must be analyzed in relation to broader processes and practices of militarization. Just as the ideology of development and hunger relief masked growing inequality and spatial unevenness, their projects contributed to widening these same social and spatial inequities. As the liberation effect wore off and provisioning strategies shifted in emphasis from reciprocal exchange to mobilization, popular affect shifted from “enthusiasm” to “anxiety.” This episode of hunger signaled that an old tension—whether to leave labor on-farm for production or allocate it off-farm for making war—had resurfaced all over again. In spite of central and regional policy-making efforts to anticipate and defuse this tension, conditions of hunger and scattered starvation indicate unresolved contradictions. Amidst consequent popular anger and dissatisfaction, the next military campaign, an even larger one, would begin.<sup>174</sup> Hunger followed military campaigns, and both followed a seasonally cyclical pattern.

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<sup>172</sup> “Chỉ thị...” 12 June 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol. 1, yr 1953 (2001), 211.

<sup>173</sup> Le Trung Dinh, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, 7.

<sup>174</sup> For more on anger and dissatisfaction, see my earlier discussion of Duong-Hong-Quang, “Việc chiếm hữu ruộng đất và thế lực phong kiến tại vùng dân tộc Thái ở Tây Bắc,” 22 Nov 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1370.

### *Linear state learning, or preparing for mobilization*

If making war was a cyclical activity, then military planning and preparation was predicated on improving each cycle linearly. Waged when roads were passable, warfare was a dry season project (fall-winter) and alternated annually with its planning during the wet season (spring-summer) when heavy rains limited mobility.<sup>175</sup> In spring-summer 1953, the DRV's enmeshed military and civilian leaders reflected on their experience conducting one of several past military campaigns to plan the next, anticipating what would be an even larger confrontation. As the largest mobilization to date, the Northwest Campaign became a learning experience: improving the efficiency of transportation and logistics enabled a growing military force to secure the DRV's territorial claim. General Giáp recalled that, "The logistic work we had done for the Northwest Campaign had given us useful experience."<sup>176</sup> With an eye towards improvement, the integrated civilian and military command reviewed the social means with which they had and, would continue, to support their fighting forces.

In a mutually reinforcing process, military campaigning expanded DRV territory and generated knowledge of how to provision the People's Army. Expanding and increasing state capacity to claim and collect agrarian resources enhanced the People's Army's fighting ability. This process of state and military learning was similar to, and intertwined with, successive rounds of agricultural taxation: based on data gathered along the way, iterative implementations informed the next round's subsequent spatial expansion and social intensification. Just as local and regional institutions generated data to inform the DRV's central command, the latter, in turn, used this knowledge to demand and effect efficiency, discipline, and improvement

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<sup>175</sup> My work picks up when and where Scott's analysis leaves off: "The Southeast Asian state, in its precolonial mandala form, its colonial guise, and, until very recently, as a nation-state, was a radically seasonal phenomenon" (2009), 61.

<sup>176</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004a), 434.

among its regional and local institutions. As this knowledge loop tightened, so did state and military programs expand spatially and their capacities intensify.

The calculus of military logistics was complex. Take, for example, a real logistical question posed hypothetically: how many porters were required to pack enough rice to feed one infantry division of 10,000 combatants moving 300 kilometers? According to the Temporary Regulations on *dân công*, pedestrian porters were supposed to, on average, walk 20 km per day and carry loads of 25 kg. Assume that a given *dân công* was entitled to 1 kilogram of rice per day for his or her own caloric subsistence.<sup>177</sup> If a 15 day march reached a 300 km distance, then a porter consumed 15 kg of rice, leaving only 10 kg per porter to meet combatant requirements. Assuming this same rate of subsistence for the combatants (1 kg/day) means that one division required 150 tons rice for combatants or, at 10 kg per porter, a total of 15,000 porters.

Of course, real logistical calculus unfolded historically, amidst manifold contingencies and uncertainties. Not all combatants received the same amount of rice per day (officers received higher rations) nor was rice the only thing *dân công* carried (including, also, ammunition, weaponry, wounded, medical supplies, salt, etc.). Nor did infantry divisions simply move to one place where supplies awaited them, as if by magic: after 15 days, they had to be re-provisioned, setting in motion columns of *dân công* moving back and forth between front lines and secure rear areas. Moreover, all campaigns lasted longer than 15 days, meaning that considerably more porters than 15,000 (per division per two weeks) would be required to sustain troops in the field. Most importantly, as the residence time on any abstract front—what were, in fact, multiple actual fronts—increased linearly, so did the number of contingencies increase

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<sup>177</sup> For mathematical simplicity, I assume full state provisioning. In practice, recall that each *dân công* laborer was required to support one's self initially (3 days for a tour up to 30 days; 7 days for a longer tour) only after which food was provided for them.

exponentially: just as one can never fully plan for weather, so too were rain-fed harvests variable; military tactics and movements changed constantly to maintain an element of surprise. Thus, scholarly estimates of *dân công* numbers required to feed a division over 300 kilometers range considerably higher than the hypothetical estimate, to between 40,000-50,000 porters.<sup>178</sup> Historical figures confirm them.<sup>179</sup>

Whatever the exact figures, manpower estimates demonstrate that labor was inseparable from figuring the amount of rice necessary to feed laborers and soldiers. Although the total amount actually consumed was calculated only after the fact (and, even then, still remains uncertain), what preoccupied military planners in mid-1953 was the high rate of consumption observed among porters themselves. General Giáp recalled that out of 5000 tons rice collected in the Red River Delta (Interzone 3) and Thanh Hoá (Interzone 4), only 1,250 tons remained when the *dân công* arrived in the mountain depot of Suối Rút (Mai Châu); on arrival in Cò Nòi to feed combatants on the Nà Sản front, only 410 tons were left. In total, over the course of a 400 km trek up and down mountainous terrain, *dân công* laborers themselves consumed 92% of the rice intended to feed combatants.<sup>180</sup> In short, laborers charged with carrying rice consumed considerably more than the soldiers the shipment was intended to feed. As state and military planners looked ahead to the next campaign, they anticipated mobilizing more labor and more rice than before. Increasing the efficiency of labor and provisioning became a priority concern.

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<sup>178</sup> Fall (1956), 84-86; Lockhart (1989), 246-247. Fall's high-end estimate of 50,000 porters required to provision one division are based on "wage rice" figures from three 1950 Presidential Decrees (SL/14-31 Jan; SL/81-20 May; SL/91-22 May). I found the decrees specify monthly remuneration rates only for ranked civilian officials and, contrary to his claim, not for military grades. Were the highest civilian allotment (80 kg/month for Regional Committee chairman) applied to the military, then Fall's figure for a general (50 lbs/ day, or 23 kg/day; 680 kg/mo) still does not follow. Note that his estimate uses an effective load of 12 lbs (5.5 kg), 12,000 as a division size, and 3 lbs (1.4 kg) as daily rice ration.

<sup>179</sup> A People's Army quartermaster captured by French forces in Laos in June 1953 said two infantry divisions required a supply column of 95,000 *dân công*. Fall (1956), 86.

<sup>180</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004a), 434; Nguyễn An, "Công tác vận tải trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ," in Viện sử học, *Mấy vấn đề về chiến thắng lịch sử Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1985), 176.

Likewise, calculating the number of laborers and the amount of provisions was inseparable from transportation infrastructure and its ongoing improvement. In early 1953, the Central Government sent a team of cadres to conduct “research” in and of the newly secured Northwest. In collaboration with the regional Party and government, the team worked to “solve problems of national livelihood policy’s integration with defense.” In particular, they performed topographical surveys to expand knowledge of existing and potential road routes.<sup>181</sup> From spring 1953 onwards, improving transportation infrastructure connecting the Northwest to the Red River delta and Thanh Hoá supported both ongoing combat as well as any anticipated confrontation. The military’s General Department of Supply led efforts to rebuild roads and flatten riverbeds and, further, to establish a system of depots and wharfs to facilitate movement of supplies along them.<sup>182</sup> They learned how to use explosives to destroy the Mã River’s steep gradients (i.e., waterfalls and rapids) and facilitate raft traffic; their experience informed army engineers and supply officers who would later domesticate other passages, such as the Ba Nậm Cúm River to connect the Điện Biên Phủ front via Lai Châu to China.<sup>183</sup>

Prior and ongoing efforts to inspect, repair, and expand overland and riverine networks linking the Northwest to other DRV-claimed territory deliberately contested colonial territorial control. Earlier, in mid to late 1951, the French Expeditionary Forces had countered these efforts with what Jean Jerusalem called a “new conceptual tactic” to protect the Thái Federation: in order to overcome the People’s Army’s advantage in troop numbers, the colonial military aimed to restore Thái Federation advantage by fortifying their positions. “It was decided,” wrote Jerusalem,

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<sup>181</sup> Đỗ Hữu Lễ in *Tổng cục Hậu cần* (2004), 229-230.

<sup>182</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004a), 440-441. Giáp’s translator refers anachronistically to the “General Department of Logistics.” Only during the American war was it later renamed *Tổng cục Hậu cần*.

<sup>183</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 190.

“to reinforce the entire front of the Thái country, facing East, with modern and solid strongholds.” A network of blockhouses or pillboxes (*blockhaus*) was constructed from Phong Thổ to Mộc Châu, including Nà Sản, in order to “protect solidly the Thái Country from the Red River.”<sup>184</sup> Although the People’s Army surmounted or avoided many of these obstacles during the Northwest Campaign, the Expeditionary Forces and the Thái Battalions nonetheless held out for months against People’s Army’s assaults at Nà Sản. French military planners interpreted the Nà Sản experience as a sound military tactic, one they drew on later at Điện Biên Phủ.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, that these blockhouses “faced East” towards and against the Red River delta indicates a late colonial attempt to enforce an old social boundary between upstream and downstream—a heavily contested effort to separate colonial Thái allies from a rising Kinh-organized challenge.

Just as their “enemy” erected barriers to regulate movement between upstream and downstream, the DRV countered by improving transportation infrastructure and facilitating flows between the mountains and the plains. Expanding transportation infrastructure bonded the Northwest Zone to downstream areas from three directions (north, east, south) and, in the process, surmounted geographic obstacles, such as waterfalls and high mountain passes, that had historically slowed and inhibited traffic in goods, ideas, and people. Drawing on *dân công* labor power, military engineers

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<sup>184</sup> Jean Jerusalem, *Monographie sur le Pays Thái* (Typescript, 1953), 58. Aside from this evidence from the early 1950s, I find no support for Jean Michaud’s dual claim, first, that this construction project began in 1891 and, second, that the network separated all “military territories” from the Red River delta. “Montagnards and the State,” *Ethnohistory* 47 (2000), 344.

<sup>185</sup> Although combat is beyond this work’s scope, note that state learning extended also to practices of militarized coercion. For example, both Expeditionary Forces and People’s Army drew on experiences at Nà Sản to develop strategies and counterstrategies for fixed position warfare. Emboldened by their ability to withstand assaults there, the Expeditionary Forces afterwards built improved “hedgehog” fortifications at Điện Biên. Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967), 30-34. Meanwhile, between the Northwest and Điện Biên Campaigns, the People’s Army refined tactics for attacking such fortifications. Furthermore, its first artillery regiment returned from China in early 1953 trained and equipped with 105 mm howitzers. Both siege tactics and artillery barrages were crucial to Điện Biên Phủ’s military outcome. Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004a), 433-34; (2004b), 6-7.



built a new route from the north, Road 13, to cross the Black River and link Yên Bái to Sơn La, where it intersected with Road 41 at Cò Nòi. They also lengthened and improved Road 41 from Hoà Bình all the way to Lai Châu town's doorstep, making it the principle east-west route through the Northwest Zone's southern stretch.<sup>186</sup> From the south, laborers and engineers lengthened and improved a road to link the “free areas” of Interzones 3 (Red River delta) and 4 (Nghệ An, Thanh Hoá) with Road 41 at Suối Rút.<sup>187</sup> Supplementing this southern route, engineers and laborers flattened waterfalls and smoothed rapids along the Mã River from Thanh Hoá westward into Laos up to Sam Neua. Finally, another overland route linked Sam Neua with Vietnamese territory, intersecting with Road 41 in Mộc Châu.<sup>188</sup>

Building and rebuilding all this transportation infrastructure served a statist agenda. During wartime, improved transportation facilitated movement of goods, ideas, and people in order to provision a mobile military force. Such movement eroded topographical barriers between a centralizing DRV and a site of alternative sovereignty. In the time to come, these routes worked to close spatial and cultural distances, and contributed to transforming relations, between montane peoples and downstream neighbors.

Coordinating and implementing all this work—calculations, preparations, collections, allocations—presented an enormous task in and of itself, leading the Central Government to create new institutions to do so. In January 1953, the Party's 4<sup>th</sup> Plenary created the Council for Front Supply (*Hội đồng Cung cấp Mặt trận*) and charged this body with “guaranteeing supplies for the military” and, “especially, to

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<sup>186</sup> This route is now known as Quốc lộ 6, or National Road 6.

<sup>187</sup> Suối Rút is now known as Mai Châu and Road 41 as Quốc Lộ 15, or National Road 15.

<sup>188</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004a), 440-441; Hoàng Văn Thái (1984), 34; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 263-264; Đỗ Hữu Lễ in Tổng cục Hậu cần (2004), 229-230.

emphasize transportation work.”<sup>189</sup> This new organization and its personnel also reinforced the Party’s leadership position among and across territorializing military and civilian institutions. That Vice Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng was named the Council’s Chairman (*Chủ tịch*) indicates the importance of military provisioning to the civilian government as well as the task’s integration—and priority placement—in the work of existing agencies.<sup>190</sup>

The Council worked closely with the General Department of Supply whose leadership and political activities, likewise, blurred boundaries between military and civilian institutions. From 1950-55, Trần Đăng Ninh served both as the General Department’s Director (*Chủ nhiệm*) and, meanwhile, as representative on the Military’s Central Party Committee (*Tổng quân ủy*). At the Party’s Second Congress in February 1951, in recognition of his work for the Borderland Campaign, he had also been elected to the Party’s Central Executive Committee.<sup>191</sup> Not only was he “directly responsible” for supplying “the front” during all the military campaigning in the Black River region, from the Northwest, to the Lao, Nà Sản, Lai Châu, and Điện Biên Phủ Campaigns.<sup>192</sup> Party Secretary Trường Chinh also ordered all provincial and interzone Party Committees (*cấp ủy*) to submit plans for local road and bridgework in compliance, and towards fulfillment of, the master plan developed by “comrade Trần.”<sup>193</sup> Like Phạm Văn Đồng’s leadership of a “civilian” provisioning institution, Trần Đăng Ninh’s leadership of a “military” equivalent illustrates how the Party bridged institutional gaps between military command and civilian government by embedding members in already enmeshed institutions. Through such ongoing

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<sup>189</sup> “Nghị quyết của Hội nghị lần thứ tư Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam,” 25-30 Jan 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 131.

<sup>190</sup> Hoàng Văn Thái (1984), 34; Nguyễn An in *Viện sử học* (1985), 174-175.

<sup>191</sup> Pike (1986), 22-32; Lockhart (1989), 121, 236.

<sup>192</sup> *Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam*, vol II (1995), 206. He fell ill during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign and his deputy, Trần Hữu Dục, handled much of the everyday work. Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 185.

<sup>193</sup> “Chỉ thị của Ban bí thư,” 15 June 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol, 14 yr 1953 (2001), 244.

reorganization, an emerging political elite centralized their power.

Just as its leadership blurred its “military” status, so too did the General Department of Supply’s everyday work blur distinctions between labor and its representation. Early on, the military supply unit instituted mechanisms to cultivate a proper ideological perspective among the *dân công* laborers on whose energies its work depended. From September 1951, the General Department housed a Department of Politics (*Cục Chính trị*) whose work was explicitly ideological, to correct any “biased perceptions” among laborers doing military transport service. During the upcoming Điện Biên Phủ Campaign, the General Department’s Vice Chairman, Trần Lương, served also as Political Commissar (*Chính ủy*) of the campaign’s rear areas. Under his leadership, the General Department developed an institutional network both to intensify mobilization of labor and provisions and to educate farmers and laborers in the meaning of the campaign, i.e. how their (in)voluntary participation would “liberate” them. Further, the General Department housed a *Dân công* Leadership Council (*Ban cán sự dân công*), a subunit charged overtly with “leading ideology” and solely with educating laborers politically.<sup>194</sup> In his capacity as a cadre in the General Department, Hoàng Công Phẩm, whose narrative opens the next chapter, recruited *dân công* laborers, supervised their duties, and monitored their morale.

Although the General Department of Supply had been operating since the Borderland Campaign of 1950, the “civilian” supply unit and its duties became concrete over 1953, during the season of planning for the upcoming winter-spring military campaign. In July, the Party Secretary’s Council (*Ban Bí thư*) charged the Council for Front Supply with providing the front with grains, transportation facilities,

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<sup>194</sup> Nguyễn Văn Thuận, “Một số vấn đề về công tác chính trị ngành cung cấp trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ” in *Tổng cục Hậu cần* (2004), 113-117.

and *dân công* laborers.<sup>195</sup> These orders fit the Council for Front Supply's work into the broader "development" agenda—i.e., agricultural taxation, regulation of trade (State Shops), rebuilding transportation, and recruiting labor—already being implemented in the Northwest Zone. Not only did this order aim to boost agrarian production, the Party also increased the government's capacity to regulate this production, and its means, through the work of accounting and "economizing." This regulatory capacity, in turn, was explicitly oriented towards serving the means and ends of militarized state-making. "*To develop the economy and finance, to develop production,*" stated the Secretary's Council's orders, "*is to foster the forces of the people, of the resistance; to construct the material infrastructure of resistance and state building.*"<sup>196</sup>

Preparing for and conducting warfare provided impetus to increase state regulatory capacity, serving to centralize power and to normalize its practice locally. The "[Party] Center and the Government" empowered the Council for Front Supply to work "directly" with "all" military interzones and civilian provinces to enforce central orders and ensure military supplies.<sup>197</sup> Subsequent orders underscored that each territorialized unit, be it military or civilian, must make the Council sub-unit "permanent," i.e. staffed with dedicated personnel. In this way, DRV leaders aimed to normalize and centralize power to claim agrarian resources *and* local government manpower: "the work of providing for the front will gradually become regular..." The composition and staffing of these sub-units indicated the scope of its activities: local front councils consisted of several cadres ("who cannot be changed so as to maintain experience and secrecy") who supervised "specialized" cadres from line agencies such

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<sup>195</sup> "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư ngày về công tác kinh tế tài chính và sản xuất tiết kiệm," 30 July 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 274.

<sup>196</sup> Italics in original. *Ibid.* p. 267.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* p. 274; Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 184; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 263.

as transport, granaries, state shops, health, post, police, propaganda, and roads.<sup>198</sup> In short, central Party and DRV leaders distributed Council powers at regional and provincial nodes to collect, tabulate, and allocate—in short, to commandeer rationally—both agrarian and bureaucratic resources.

As the dimensions of large-scale fixed position combat became clearer, such efforts to centralize state capacity accelerated, particularly with respect to ratcheting the DRV's local institutional powers to regulate agrarian production's means and ends. Just as the Navarre Plan stimulated an ambitious People's Army's winter-spring plan, so too did enmeshed DRV and Party leaders redouble efforts to institutionalize mechanisms to mobilize agrarian resources and rationalize claims. Armed with data from prior military campaigns, central leaders conducted a comprehensive policy review of *dân công* laws and provisioning guidelines. Aiming to increase efficiency in service to militarized state-making, they equipped themselves with tools to intensify—and make “permanent”—claims on agrarian labor and output.

If remaking the peasantry into a pool of labor was an ongoing process, so too were efforts to know and regulate the process from afar. Admitting in July 1953 that *dân công* work and organization during the Northwest Campaign had been troubled by “many violations and mistakes,” the Party Secretary's Council pointed ahead to new reforms.<sup>199</sup> In September, the Prime Minister's Secretariat rendered the Temporary Regulations (183/TTg) on the mobilization and use of *dân công* into a formal Government Decision (308/TTg).<sup>200</sup> Signed by Vice Prime Minister (and head of the Council on Front Supply) Phạm Văn Đồng, the new iteration performed a two-fold

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<sup>198</sup> “Thông tri của Ban Bí thư về nhiệm vụ cung cấp cho mặt trận,” 9 Nov 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 346.

<sup>199</sup> “Chỉ thị...” 30 July 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 274.

<sup>200</sup> Phạm Văn Đồng, “Nghị định số 308-TTg,” 10 Sept 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1296.

function: to initiate the rationalization and enumeration of service durations in terms of days worked (*công*); and to delegate to the Ministry of Labor the explanation and implementation of these procedures. The law also hinted at the broad range of institutions granted powers to request and recruit labor in the name of state.<sup>201</sup>

The Ministry of Labor codified the amended *dân công* procedures in a circular dated 12 October 1953 sent to all manner of institutions and all territorial units throughout DRV territory, including the Northwest Zone.<sup>202</sup> After expressing concern with stagnating productivity among the *dân công* labor force, the Ministry's circular claimed to have identified, at one stroke, a cause and solution for any problems related to mobilizing and using *dân công* labor—a system of accounting for days worked. With no relevant mechanism under the Temporary Resolution, the circular acknowledged two problematic trends. First, there was a broad disparity between some “vigilant” individuals serving 3-4 months, to “lazy” ones working only 5-10 days, to still others shirking their duties altogether. As a result, the “vigilant” people became “heavily jealous” and caused overall *dân công* labor productivity to flatten. Second, laborers wished to know beforehand the duration of their assignments in order to “make a living,” pointing to what was, at root, a deeper tension over the rightful site of peasant labor (i.e., on- or off-farm). “These are several very legitimate aspirations of the people,” read the circular, “and they need to be resolved so that *dân công* can serve with peace of mind.” Thus the Ministry of Labor instituted a system to record and enumerate an individual's service duration, a measure designed both to provide him or her with official certification and to leave a paper trail for government inspections.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> The following institutions are listed recipients, indicating the impending labor mobilization's scope: Ministries of Labor, Defense, Internal Affairs, Transportation, Finance; propaganda outlets; all Resistance and Administrative Committees *and* Interzones of northern and southern “Vietnam” (i.e., Việt Bắc, Interzones 3 & 4, Northwest Zone, Tả Ngạn (Red River), Nam Bộ (Southern salient), Hà Nội); mass organizations (Farmers' Council, Labor Union, and Youth League). *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>202</sup> Bộ Lao Động, “Thông tư số 12 LĐ / TTg,” 12 Oct 1953, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1296.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

Note that the regulations still did not set an upper limit on service durations. Rather, far from alleviating a burdensome requirement of citizenship, *rationalizing* claims to labor served a dual purpose, in both senses of the word: both to justify claims and to apply them with increased efficiency.

*Dân công* policy changes and adjustments illustrated how central policy-makers self-consciously joined tasks of legitimating and institutionalizing their own power with respect to regulating labor of ostensibly *national* subjects. Recall how, at the same time, mass mobilization for land reform allowed for the appearance, and encouraged the identification, of new individual enemies to appear *within* national society (i.e., class criminals). Together, the DRV arrogated the role of monitoring and surveilling individualized behavior among populations collectivized as national labor.<sup>204</sup> Through these processes, the Central Government positioned itself as the first and final arbiter of a given individual's public behavior both as cadre and as citizen, to decide whether one's social actions merited award or deserved punishment.

These simultaneously individualizing and collectivizing regulations were accompanied by an ideological shift with regards to an evolving idea of state propagated and cultivated by central leaders. In addition to an earlier state idea as a solicitous, parental figure, now the state idea incorporated a disembodied disciplinary element—as though a parent might keep track of a child's behavior from afar, even in his absence.<sup>205</sup> In a letter to cadre and *dân công* building roads and bridges dated September 1953, President Hồ Chí Minh articulated a subtle change in tone: “I, along with the Party and Government, will always *watch over* each of your work.”<sup>206</sup> The

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<sup>204</sup> For more on the dialectical process of regulating collective behavior individually and individual behavior collectively, cf., Corrigan and Sayer (1985), esp. Ch. 6.

<sup>205</sup> In a Vietnamese socio-linguistic context, I would argue that the parentalized state was a gendered parent, i.e. a father not a mother. Hồ Chí Minh embodied this role.

<sup>206</sup> “Bác cùng Đảng và Chính phủ luôn luôn theo dõi công tác của các cô, các chú.” “Thư gửi cán bộ và đồng bào dân công cầu đường,” 16 Sept 1953, *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, vol 7, yrs 1953-55 (1996), 140.

word “*theo dõi*” (or, “*theo dõi*”) captures the ambivalent nature of accepting a higher authority, like a policeman or parent, empowered to “watch” or to “follow closely” a real or potential subject.<sup>207</sup> This is an idea of state as embodiment of verticalized power.<sup>208</sup> By entering into this relationship, the effect is to discipline the individual in his or her performance of collective work. Crucial to this emergent relationship was both a notion of (dis)embodied authority responsible for inspecting officials and peasants alike; and a set of institutions empowered to punish “lazy” individuals and to reward “vigilant” ones. Use of this surveillance concept not only paralleled ongoing work to centralize regulatory, planning, and inspection capacities. Hồ Chí Minh also echoed its very language.<sup>209</sup>

The Central Government’s emphasis on justifying claims to labor and improving efficiency portended a particular transformation for peoples in and of the Black River region. By November 1953, preparations for the winter-spring campaign reached a fever pitch: the Politburo had decided on confronting the French in the Northwest, meaning that the People’s Army faced squarely the difficult problem of supply at a distance from more readily available labor and provisions. In a break with previous public policy, their logistics plans called for mobilizing provisions and labor in proximity to the front, a plan known as “mobilizing logistics in place” (*huy động hậu cần tại chỗ*).<sup>210</sup> Securing food locally trimmed *dân công* consumption rates and reduced the amount of labor necessary for transport. General Giáp credited this idea to Trần Đăng Ninh, director of the General Department of Supply.<sup>211</sup> Meanwhile, French

<sup>207</sup> Đặng Chấn Liêu et al (2001), 690.

<sup>208</sup> James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, “Spatializing States: Towards an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality,” *American Ethnologist* 29 (2002), 982.

<sup>209</sup> For example, Trường Chinh mandated all provincial and Party Committees (*cấp ủy*) “daily to watch over (*theo dõi*) and lead bridge and roadwork, to conduct inspections thoughtfully. Submit detailed bridge and roadwork plans monthly.” “Chỉ thị của Ban bí thư,” 15 June 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 244.

<sup>210</sup> Cf., Cao Van Luong et al, *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân khu Tây Bắc (1945-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội), 437.

<sup>211</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004a), 435.



military planners dismissed the notion that the People's Army could muster sufficient logistical resources to sustain the kind of engagement envisioned in the Navarre Plan. If the battle at Điện Biên Phủ hinged on the tactics of siege warfare, then the longer and underlying Điện Biên Phủ Campaign hinged on the practice and process of social mobilization in and of a centrally marginal place.

## CHAPTER 6

### MOBILIZATION IN PLACES

Mobilization intensified and expanded in 1953 and 1954. The empirical shift has theoretical ramifications: the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign was a crucible of militarized state-making. This chapter builds on the previous chapter's arguments to extend the analysis of militarization, calculation, and spatial regulation in and through this period of intensification. As an everyday practice of state formation, mobilization drew on, reproduced, and transformed historically-generated relations of rule both among Black River peoples and between them and an emerging national center of power. In other words, mobilization appeared concretely at a particular moment but figured in a longer process of making a DRV state in the Black River region.

Mobilization arose as a militarized practice of claim-making contingent on, and generative of, underlying and ongoing—and heavily contested—social processes of state formation. Intensifying and expanding the recruitment of peasants as *dân công* labor and collecting their rice as taxes depended on prior and emerging relations of rule. As such, mobilization drew on and reproduced these relations of rule—recognized as DRV authority—just as recognition of power in state form partially legitimated claim-making practices. The spatial un-evenness of the DRV's legitimate power influenced processes, practices, and outcomes of social mobilization. How these processes worked together or apart varied from district to district, or according to underlying *muang* and surrounding highland communities. The process was not uniform nor was its outcome everywhere the same: it was not mobilization in one place but, rather, mobilization in a number of places.

If mobilization, like state-making more generally, followed and reinforced locally configured relations of rule, then neither unfolded always according to plan. A

contingent decision in early 1954 to extend the Điện Biên Phủ campaign meant that claims levied on northern Vietnam's agrarian population increased to unprecedented levels. Unlike prior military actions in the Northwest Zone, the policy of mobilization in place intensified and expanded claims on its people's labor and food resources. Centrally-organized claims were hardly unprecedented but built on, and worked alongside, patterns of reciprocal exchange. Nor did these claims materialize only with the presence of military or centralized institutions. By describing the rise and decline of centrally-organized institutional capacity, this chapter illustrates that such capacity was not established finally, nor was its change always linear. Rather, making and enforcing claims both drew on and strengthened local institutions that, themselves, were constructed by incorporating Thái elites and social relations embedded both in the pre-colonial *muang* and in colonial notions of ethnicity and territoriality.

Mobilization in general, and *dân công* service and military provisioning in particular, involved violence and produced unintended consequences. Violence, coercion, and policing not only accompanied state formation but also backed up legitimation work. To mislabel the result of state claims "contributions" motivated by a "cheerful spirit of voluntarism" only underlines subsequent efforts to recount and represent what was at the time a contested, open-ended social process.<sup>1</sup> Loosing labor and capital from peasants and remaking relations of rule to do so involved educating consent as well as organizing armed force and policing individual behavior.

Analyzing mobilization in places such as districts of Điện Biên Phủ and Mường Lay reveals a spectrum where coercion and consent differed only by degree;

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<sup>1</sup> For contemporaneous praise of the "people's spirit of sacrifice and contribution," see Khu Tây Bắc, "Báo cáo công tác thuế nông nghiệp 1954," 27 Apr 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (145-1954), file no. 2621, p. 2. For re-appraisal, cf., Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ Tỉnh Lai Châu, "Vai trò của Đảng bộ và nhân dân tỉnh Lai Châu trong cuộc tiến công chiến lược đông-xuân 1953-1954 và chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ," in Viện sử học, *Mấy Vấn đề về chiến thắng lịch sử Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1985), 107-118.

militarized state-making relied on both. If coercion accompanied legitimation, then legitimation also accompanied coercion. Even in the Thái Federation's former capital of Lai Châu, where revolutionary organizing did not precede DRV occupation and social mobilization, the smashing of old symbols, distribution of scarce goods, and redistribution of official and private property all helped to under-write popular legitimacy for reconfigured ruling relations. Yet such intensive mobilization entailed hidden costs and unexpected outcomes. Extracting scarce resources from Black River agrarian societies caused hunger, stimulated population flight, and generated organized opposition.

### ***Encounter, mobilization, boundaries***

In October 1953, Hoàng Công Phẩm was appointed to serve as a political instructor for Brigade 325 in the People's Army of Vietnam. Called up at a pivotal moment in the anti-colonial war, he served in the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign in a range of capacities: first, as a commander mobilizing labor and supplies to support frontline soldiers; then, as an inspector monitoring battlefield morale; and, following the French surrender in May 1954, as a delegate arranging prisoner exchanges. Departing along with other former combatants, he left what he called the "beloved land of Điện Biên Phủ" in the summer of 1954 "to return home downstream."<sup>2</sup>

When the cadre Hoàng Công Phẩm traveled to the highland frontier in late 1953 to take part in a military campaign of grand scale, he followed a path blazed by earlier waves of revolutionary soldiers and officials. Whereas Hoàng traveled through newly-secured territory to participate in an offensive maneuver against an isolated French force, political cadres in the late 1940s were engaged in a guerilla action deep

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<sup>2</sup> Hoàng Công Phẩm, "Chúng tôi đi chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ," in Nhiều tác giả [multiple authors], *Điện Biên Phủ: ký ức và nhân chứng* (Huế: NXB Thuận Hoá, 2004), 74.

in enemy-controlled territory. Hoàng and his predecessors alike participated in a political project pitting them against the French empire and its local instantiation, the Thái Federation. Over the course of the First Indochina War (1946-54), how he and other like-minded revolutionaries appealed to local people and secured resources to support a statist agenda was crucial to the French defeat. Their encounters also built on and generated enduring relations, categories, and ideas of rule. How Hoàng and others remembered these encounters illuminates how recounting a past in Vietnamese figures in prior and ongoing legitimization work.

Amongst the copious literature chronicling the battle of Điện Biên Phủ, Hoàng Công Phẩm's reflections stand out for what he witnessed, enacted, and remembered in the longer campaign. His memoir, entitled, "We went on the Điện Biên Phủ Military Campaign," shows Hoàng to be a careful participant observer in the months he spent on Vietnam's emerging Northwest frontier.<sup>3</sup> Recalling experiences as an officer responsible for the muster of labor and supplies, his recollections humanize a power-laden encounter between state functionaries and local residents expected to yield scarce resources. Through his memories of encounter and mobilization, we can see multiple boundaries in the making.

Born in 1925 near the old imperial capital of Huế, Hoàng had a wife and child in late 1953 when the People's Army of Vietnam assigned him to the General Department of Supply.<sup>4</sup> He was one of many serving in a military campaign of remarkable scale. Over 50,000 soldiers in the People's Army faced some 13,000 French-allied soldiers on the hills and plain of Điện Biên Phủ.<sup>5</sup> Feeding and equipping

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<sup>3</sup> Hoàng Công Phẩm, "Chúng tôi..." in *Nhiều tác giả* (2004), 63-78.

<sup>4</sup> Recorded in his memoir as, *Tổng cục hậu cần chiến dịch*. *Ibid.* p. 64. Cf., "Hồ sơ về Hoàng Công Phẩm," NAVC 3, Phòng Ủy ban thống nhất Chính phủ, file no. 53076.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1967), vii.

these two armies squared off in a mountain valley distant from secure base areas was, for both, a difficult and pressing problem. The French relied on air transport and dismissed their adversaries' allegedly rudimentary logistical capacity. The People's Army supplied itself over land across topographically tortuous terrain on lines stretching up to 500 kilometers. Solving this logistical problem required many more personnel than the number of combatants: Hoàng joined 3,000 logistics officers who oversaw an estimated 260,000 *dân công* laborers and porters.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the number of combatants and noncombatants mobilized during the campaign surpassed the Northwest Zone's total resident population.

As a cadre in the military supply department, Hoàng grew familiar with the forested, mountainous terrain in Vietnam's present-day provinces of Sơn La, Lai Châu, Điện Biên, Hà Giang, and Lào Cai. It was on one side of this Sino-Vietnamese frontier zone where, he said, "[we] had to collect *dân công* for transport." In other words, it was Hoàng's job to remake the women and men of these hills into conscripted laborers—to organize them into lines of marching porters to bear rice and weaponry to the battlefield. Although Vietnam's official historical record acknowledges *dân công* "sacrifice" for, or "contributions" towards, an implicit national community, the people themselves often appear merely as abstract, summary statistics; their actions explained as "voluntary." Hoàng's memoir helps restore historicity to *dân công* service in all its ambivalence to Điện Biên Phủ's story.

Hoàng and his team plied a newly opened, cross-border route with China called "The Glorious Line" (*tuyến Vinh Quang*). It was the northernmost of three supply lines leading to the battlefield. From the southeast, *dân công* porters from Thành Hoá pushed heavily-laden pack bicycles along the banks of the Mã River. From

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<sup>6</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Hợp and Nguyễn Hữu Đạo, "Sức mạnh tổng hợp của cả nước và chiến thắng Điện Biên Phủ," in *Viện sử học* (1985), 98-100.

the east, automotive transport, including over 600 Soviet-manufactured Molotova trucks, plied roads connecting with the Việt Bắc revolutionary base. From the north, when food supplies from Vietnam's own farmers proved insufficient to feed combatants, Chinese aid flowed overland and downstream from Mengtse, Yunnan under Hoàng's watchful eye.<sup>7</sup>

Hoàng began his tour on the Glorious Line supervising army engineers who detonated explosives along the Nậm Na River's rapids and waterfalls, rendering its waters navigable. It took a month for a battalion of sappers to tame the river before Hoàng and his crew could float rice downstream from China. The line followed the Nậm Na, traversed mountain passes, and connected with a supply depot at Mường Tòng.<sup>8</sup> Chinese laborers hauled rice and bamboo logs to a wharf at Ba Nậm Cúm. Then Hoàng oversaw Vietnamese laborers who fashioned rafts from the bamboo, loaded them with rice, and floated downstream together towards the depot. The perilous round-trip journey took three days.

At this point, we can see a spatial boundary coming into view. For Hoàng, what defined the Sino-Vietnamese border was, literally, a division of labor. Whereas inanimate objects crossed this spatial boundary, Chinese laborers worked on one side and Vietnamese on the other. Goods but not people flowed over the border.<sup>9</sup> Respective states retained sovereign power to regulate their populations as a national people. As individual citizens, these people were subject to particular state claims on their labor power: note that *dân công* was, at the time, a neologism created by neatly

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<sup>7</sup> King Chen, *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 275.

<sup>8</sup> Now known as Mường Pồn, located in the district and province of Điện Biên.

<sup>9</sup> Much like the late 20<sup>th</sup> century North American Free Trade Agreement, labor was regulated differently in comparison with commodities: though goods and weapons flowed "freely" across national borders, labor mobility was sharply restricted. Only senior Chinese advisors were present at the Điện Biên Phủ front. For NAFTA, cf., Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 103-106. For Sino-Vietnamese relations, cf., Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 46-49.

inverting the particles for “citizen” (*công dân*). Performing as a laborer thus came to be equated with citizenship, with belonging to, and in, only one nation. Hoàng helped legitimize as national service what amounted to state conscription of unpaid labor.

On the Vietnamese side of this international border, Hoàng’s recollections point to the remaking of intranational boundaries through processes of militarized encounter and social mobilization. Of everyone he tasked with dragging rafts and hauling rice around waterfalls, the majority were, he observed, “ethnically” Hmong and Thái. “On one occasion,” he wrote, “a female Hmong *dân công* sat down crying and did not work; I was perplexed but I could not speak their language, could not understand the reasons why.” Later, he consulted a fellow cadre specializing in such “ethnic areas.” His colleague said, “[Hmong] customs are that men and women must be together in one place and, when night falls, they sing and dance happily.” He continued, “[If] you force them to live in isolation like people downstream,” alluding to the cadres’ shared regional origins, “they do not work at all.” Though why she cried remained unknown to Hoàng, he no longer “pestered” Hmong workers on his crew.

In March 1954, after three months of digging into the hills and lining the plain with trenches, the People’s Army began their siege on the French stronghold of Điện Biên Phủ. Meanwhile, Hoàng had completed his stint supervising riverine rice transport and reported to the depot at Mường Tòng for reassignment. His narrative pauses there to reflect personally on the place’s national significance. Located 15 km north of Điện Biên’s plain, Mường Tòng lay at a strategic junction where an outlying road joined with another route linking Điện Biên to the town of Lai Châu. Little did he know that the route was known in French as the “*piste Pavie*” (Pavie track) in honor of the explorer and mapmaker who, in the 1890s, had negotiated with the local ruler, Đèo Văn Trì, to bound this region and bring it into French empire. Rather, Hoàng was proud to be stationed at this crossroads because of its role in a recent battle.



In December 1953 when a unit of Thái partisans pulled out of Lai Châu to join the main force in Điện Biên Phủ, the People's Army temporarily blocked their retreat at Mường Tòng.<sup>10</sup> The unit was led by Đèo Văn Long's son in law—or Đèo Văn Tri's grandson by marriage—and their departure spelled the end of the Thái Federation. Again, for Hoàng, the significance lay elsewhere. It was on this hallowed ground where Bế Văn Đàn had “sacrificed” (*hy sinh*) his life to counterattack the “enemy” unit. Because high shrubs and heavy rain obscured the gunner's view, Bế hoisted the machine gun over his head, propped the bipod on his shoulders, and held it fast. Although Bế died shortly thereafter, his manner of death achieved recognition befitting a “revolutionary martyr” (*liệt sỹ*).

It was at the depot in Mường Tòng where Hoàng observed that, “the Hmong way of life is very different from that of the Thái.” He also became personally familiar with the “Thái way of life.” He and his commanding officer on the Glorious Line lived in close proximity to Thái villages and visited them frequently. In the evenings, the villagers invited them to participate in folk dancing (*xoè*) into the wee hours. He was blissfully unaware that fellow cadres cited *xoè* style performances before French and Thái military audiences as typifying the colonial exploitation of women.<sup>11</sup> “Thái women are very sentimental,” chided his commander, “make sure you don't get reprimanded for that!” Evidently, though Hoàng had a wife and child in Huế, the Thái women appeared to him as a source of temptation. “Thái women were very gentle and sweet,” he recalled. “Sometimes they would call out to us very endearingly, ‘Oh, Mr. soldier! Over here, Mr. soldier!’”

After his stint at Mường Tòng and until the French surrender on 7 May 1954,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf., Raymond Muelle, *Combats en Pays Thaï de Lai Chau à Diên Biên Phu, 1953-1954* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1999), esp. ch 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., Phan Mỹ, “Báo cáo sơ lược về tình hình công việc chính quyền trong hai tháng 10 và 11—1952 tại vùng mới được giải phóng ở Tây Bắc,” 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456.

Hoàng served the General Political Command inspecting soldier morale on Điện Biên Phủ's frontlines. At this point, his memoir turns away from local observation towards a more standard narrative of the military's steady advance to triumph.

In addition to his local observations, Hoàng also describes how he remembers his time in the frontier warzone. On the one hand, he expresses mixed feelings about working the Glorious Line. "One thing still troubles me from this period," he writes, recalling how one day, "Some number of *dân công* from Phú Thọ province along with two Party members rode a raft that drifted into a grotto where they all went missing." Although he knew that they died in that cave, what still bothers him is less their death *per se* and more whether or not their death was officially recognized, whether they had "yet achieved consecration as revolutionary martyrs." On the other hand, his time in the Northwest crystallizes as a bundle of gendered and nostalgic memories. After returning home "downstream," whenever he heard the popular song "Remember the Northwest" Hoàng describes how his heart would stir. Its lyrics conjure the region as a place of feminine smiles and natural beauty.<sup>12</sup> He harks back to the region's forests and mountains, recalling his days there as "arduous but dreamy and romantic." He remembers the place as a site of nostalgia, a stage for manly struggle and valor.

These selections from Hoàng's experiences in the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign narrate his participation in a series of encounters with local residents in a concretizing frontier of Vietnam. The notion of encounter refers, simply, to a meeting between people or peoples.<sup>13</sup> Yet the 1950s Black River region encounters retold by Hoàng

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<sup>12</sup> Hoàng cites the lyrics of "Nhớ Tây Bắc" in full. "Chúng tôi..." in Nhiều tác giả (2004), 67-68.

<sup>13</sup> Many scholars of frontiers draw on Richard White's "middle ground" thesis describing encounter in terms of cultural interaction, blending, and negotiation. Pat Giersch applies the model next door in an earlier period. Yet the mid-20<sup>th</sup> c. Black River region departs from White's vision of a 17<sup>th</sup> c. North American middle ground: where encounter involved cultural exchange, mixing, and reconfiguration; when force was suspended and "boundaries" between Native American and French social worlds "melted at the edges and merged." White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the*

unfolded in a field of force where actors recognized social differences and, as a result, manifold boundaries appeared, reappeared, and assumed lasting shape. The militarized encounter was at once a process of social differentiation; and the recognition and legitimation of one form of difference, that of state, to regulate all other forms—with force if necessary.

Encounter, then, also refers to the establishment of formative relations between peoples who conceive of themselves as somehow different from one another. Hoàng was an agent in militarized encounter, forming and reforming powerful boundaries within national community and generating conceptions of idealized self and other. In the above story, the “other” figures as the mountain-dwelling, ethnicized, gendered subjects who labored, as dancers or porters, on his behalf. Emotion among these female subjects ran a thin line between sensitive and hysterical: whereas the female Thái were sexualized as “sweet” and tempting, the crying Hmong woman was virtually inscrutable. Local men are curiously absent from his narrative. In contrast, as a young male embarking on an expedition to serve the nation bravely, perhaps even heroically, Hoàng embodied an idealized national self. Like his colleague from “downstream,” his ethnic identity goes unstated, serving to naturalize Kinh-ness and its dominant presence within national communal space. As discussed previously, state-making dichotomized relations within national space between upstream and downstream, majority and minority, state and society. To this list, Hoàng adds the bifurcated gender categories of male and female. The young cadre not only regulated the appearance of these enmeshed boundaries but enacted their consequences.

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*Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50-52; Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). For a reappraisal of White's thesis in historical context, see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, “From Borderlands to Borders,” *American Historical Review* 104 (1999): 814-841. For a theoretical perspective incorporating modernity and violence into an idea of encounter, see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 68-71.

At this moment, not only were the social boundaries of national community in flux but so were its spatial limitations. During this phase of military struggle, political elites determined to expand national territory throughout what they called Vietnam, including the Thái Federation's remnants, up to projected international borders with Laos and China. Fulfilling this claim hinged both on militarized enforcement and on making a state that could call on a corresponding nation's collective labors. If militarization quickens and compresses state-making, then the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign accelerated an already rapid process of institutionalizing, territorializing, and legitimating relations of rule.

Armed with an authority vested in his self to command others, Hoàng presented state power to mobilize subjects as natural, as an unquestioned legitimate right. Yet mobilizing land, labor, and capital involved making institutions empowered to do so and naturalizing these transformed social relations. Mobilization, in other words, aimed to legitimate profoundly unequal social relations and render them natural or normal. Conscripting women (and men) to serve as porters required staking claims on their energies bound up in household and farm, remaking them as *dân công* laborers, and diverting labor as such to road and river. Gathering food for the military required a similar claim-making practice and transformative process: increasing agricultural production, diverting foodstocks away from farm and market, and reallocating provisions as such towards sites of military consumption.

Social mobilization reproduced state and society, and lent them concrete form, as mutually-constituted realms, each endowed with a particular relation to, and claim on, the means and ends of production. Demolishing rocky rapids with explosives on the Nậm Na River illustrates the transformation of wild nature into a navigable waterway, from unusable to productive landscape. Domesticating nature also serves as a metaphor to describe the modernizationist terms in which the DRV conceived of its

militarized social intervention: to destroy feudal and colonial exploitation and, in their place, build a rational socialist state to deliver progress to a national society. Like the stochastic tendency displayed even by tamed rivers, however, people often overflowed the categories constructed to contain them. Social mobilization was an everyday form of state formation, at once a state regulatory practice and a complex, non-linear, and highly contested social process.

Legitimizing relations of rule occurred not only in the moment but also subsequently. In modern Vietnam, where history-making is an official endeavor, state power also resides in an ability to re-present the past in particular ways. Who is empowered to tell and retell stories of encounter and mobilization speaks to knowledge-production as well as to memory and its collective remaking. Hoàng wrote his memoir in Vietnamese, using the national script (*quốc ngữ*), from the perspective of a loyal, ranking cadre. Such eye-witness accounts, like contemporary official reports more generally, produce authoritative knowledge of social difference in national space, informing readers about ethnicity, language, customs, etc. Such language facility and official position, however, were largely beyond the reach of those people Hoàng and others like him mobilized. The diverse peoples reproduced as abstracted *dân công* had stories too but their circulation was bounded in place by orality, vernacularity, and differential power.<sup>14</sup> Vietnamese vocality works in tandem with multiple silences to Vietnamize the historical record. By reading Hoàng's account and archived reports for what they say and what they do not, I attempt to open up these silences by locating historical subjects, or their ambiguous traces.

Vietnamizing the past, or nationalizing collective memory, is an ongoing project. Successive iterations of Vietnamese states have worked hard to commemorate

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<sup>14</sup> Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); "Peasants do not write," notes Shaid Amin, "they are written about." *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1.

people and events as exemplars of national service.<sup>15</sup> Even within his text, state power to memorialize one's "sacrifice" was on Hoàng's mind. Whether worrying about his missing comrades' official status or exalting the memory of a hero, he recognized and acknowledged state power to declare one a "martyr." In Bế Văn Đàn's case, the DRV in 1955 awarded him posthumously with the nation's highest military honor, Hero of the Armed Forces. Roads, songs, and schools in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam now bear his name.

Commemoration works, from cemeteries in Điện Biên Phủ to annual celebrations of the "great victory," shape and reshape an isomorphism between nation, society, and state. After all, Hoàng's memoir, republished in honor of the battle's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, was part of a massive, centralized effort to celebrate a triumphant outcome at Điện Biên Phủ. The introduction accompanying his memoir captures a curious paradox on display during these commemorations: the publishers write, "the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign has entered the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century mankind as a noble and eternal history." Even as the events in question are located in time, they are presented as outside of history. The publishers go further still: by equating military victory with "victory for the strength and unity of the Vietnamese people," they contribute to extricating a particular idea of nation from the vicissitudes of contingency, contest, and disunity.<sup>16</sup> Although the commemorative volume was published in 2004, it does not specify when Hoàng Công Phẩm wrote his piece. Such reproduction of his memoirs, then, remakes a tale written at a particular moment into a temporally transcendent piece. The volume represents a historically specific recollection as one that stands both outside time yet always with and for Vietnam.

Finally, Hoàng's narrative also provides a fleeting glimpse of what has been

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<sup>15</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> NXB Thuận Hoá, "Thay lời giới thiệu," in *Nhiều tác giả* (2004), 7.

forgotten in these official narratives. Neither the Vietnamese nation nor its heroes alone were responsible for the ultimate outcome. His experience moving rice from China to the front is potent reminder that the revolution was not hermetically-sealed as nation, emerging triumphant over foreign invaders. Rather, the anti-colonial revolutionary struggle depended, in part, on timely overseas aid from (sometimes) friendly international sources. His experience mobilizing local labor is reminder that even heroic soldiers earned renown only through efforts of underacknowledged civilians and their mutual suffering. Whatever the People's Army accomplished in 1953-54, their efforts depended on the many un-named porters and farmers who fed them and kept them moving. It is to their mobilization, representation, and hidden stories that we now turn.

### ***Preparation, organization, contingency***

In contrast to the 1952 Northwest Campaign when, at least initially, most supplies and labor came from neighboring regions, the strategy to “mobilize logistics in place” shifted the burden of supplying labor and food on to the region's local residents. Preparations for the winter-spring 1953-54 military campaign, known only later as the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign, were predicated on a heightened military confrontation. This shift and the anticipated scale of combat renewed ongoing institutional reorganization.

In a November Circular issued only a week and a half before French paratroopers landed in Điện Biên Phủ, Central Party decision-makers underlined how all manner of claims would not only extend to the Northwest Zone but, in line with the above strategy, intensify there. The Party Secretary Council's Circular delimited the spatial expanse of intensive mobilization: from the mountainous Northwest and Việt Bắc Zones into neighboring Interzones 3 and 4. For residents and officials in this

territorial arc, the “duty” of supplying the front, stated the Circular ominously, “is about to be very heavy.”<sup>17</sup>

In terms of provisions, the Council ordered Administrative and Resistance Committees “to attach special importance to *rice* and *meat*, especially the Northwest Zone, to rice harvest, *rice milling*, tax collection and transport...”<sup>18</sup> Attending to rice milling and meat preservation indicated the Central Government’s intent to transform local farm capital into portable foodstuffs. Sixty millers traveled from “downstream” up to the Northwest to instruct “locals” in processing harvested rice, to facilitate turning their harvest into the army’s edible provisions.<sup>19</sup> Additional quantities of salt were no longer intended for legitimization work alone but, also, to turn locally-managed livestock into transportable, preserved meat. Like before, the agricultural tax served as a state mechanism to learn about subjects, to gauge their productive capacity, and to demand a portion of their rice crop for military consumption.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of transport, the Council ordered roadwork to continue and the adoption of new technologies to improve transportation labor efficiency. Maintaining the road network in face of aerial bombardment, especially at vulnerable chokepoints like river crossings, required constant inspection and holding laborers in reserve for quick repairs. Above all, the circular ordered, “*do not allow the enemy to cut off transportation.*” The Council drafted all vehicles and watercraft into military transportation work, to “reduce human energy.” Bicycles were singled out as the

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<sup>17</sup> “Thông tri của Ban Bí thư về nhiệm vụ cung cấp cho mặt trận,” 9 Nov 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2001), 344.

<sup>18</sup> Italics in original. *Ibid.* p. 345.

<sup>19</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, *Lịch sử cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp 1945-1954*, vol II (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1995), 291. Note how emphasizing productivity and one-way learning recapitulated dichotomized relations between sites of under-development and development, upstream and downstream, ethnic minority and Kinh majority. Likewise, General Hoàng Văn Thái writes these millers taught the “ethnic people of the Northwest” how to husk and pound rice “like downstream people.” *Cuộc tiến công chiến lược đông xuân 1953-1954* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1984), 47.

<sup>20</sup> “Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư về công tác kinh tế tài chính và sản xuất tiết kiệm,” 30 July 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 269-270.



“best” form of transport, because their higher load capacity (60-100kg) boosted productivity over pedestrian porters.<sup>21</sup> Subsequent photographic representations of the campaign elevate pack bicycles (*xe đạp thô*) as synonymous with individualized transport efficiency.<sup>22</sup>

All this transportation work required laborers predisposed to work and presupposed as workers. “Now and later,” stated the Council, “we will still need to use *dân công*.” The order affirmed adherence to *dân công* regulations, particularly assigning service based on public assessments (*bình nghị*) and placing “special emphasis on productivity.” Like President Hồ before the Northwest Campaign, the Circular stated, “The work of *dân công* is political work.” As such, both a Party member and an “excited” cadre well-versed in relevant policies were to accompany each team of laborers. Anyone operating in “ethnic minority areas,” where “infrastructure is weak and cadres are insufficient,” had special instructions: to find “vigilant elements” and make them into cadres; to educate these local cadres and *dân công* in the Government’s Ethnic Policy and, overall, to adhere to the policy’s principal of “unity.”<sup>23</sup>

As an ascribed “ethnic minority area,” the circular carried a special message for the Northwest Zone. Mobilizing resources was an ends in itself as well as a means towards other ends: to recruit local Party members and state officials; to set the terms for national “unity.” Mobilization, therefore, was also a project of national state-making. What, then, did “unity” mean? Gazetted as official DRV policy only in June 1953, the Ethnic Policy offered terms of national inclusion and exclusion to real and prospective subjects in the Black River region. According to a summary cadres used in

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<sup>21</sup> Italics in original. “Thông tri...” 9 Nov 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 345-6.

<sup>22</sup> Cf., Nguyễn Đình Hưng, “Sức mạnh dân công trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ,” in *Nhiều tác giả*, (2004), 84-85.

<sup>23</sup> “Thông tri...” 9 Nov 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 345-6, 348.

popular study sessions held there, “all ethnic majority and ethnic minorities must cherish, help, and treat one another as siblings.” To accept these terms means acknowledging how the category of ethnicity mediated one’s membership in national community; the ethnic form was an ascribed minority identity in relation to an ostensible Kinh majority. “Unity in equality and mutual assistance,” the summary continues, “means that all Kinh, Thổ, Thái, Man [Dao], Mèo [Hmong], etc. are ranked equivalently regarding rights and responsibilities.”<sup>24</sup> Although the document describes the agricultural tax as one such “responsibility,” the duty of *dân công* labor goes unmentioned. Moreover, notwithstanding such lofty ideals, the abstract idea of “unity” contained an inherent contradiction between stated equality and underlying inequality. According to the dominant Kinh/Viet cultural context, siblings (*anh em*) are inherently unequal, ranked according to age.<sup>25</sup> In practice, this inequality became manifest in the rank asserted by Kinh cadres in relation to non-Kinh peoples generally and to local cadres, prospective subjects, and potential laborers particularly.

Legitimation work targeted not only imagined *dân công* laborers but actual cadres as well. Through exhibiting exemplary organization and conduct, according to the Council, “all cadres and party members become nuclei, paragons pulling and prodding the masses to follow.”<sup>26</sup> State actors were to act as catalysts of social mobilization through their personal comportment, to be models for social emulation. According to this old mode of social transmission, the cadres’ embrace of revolutionary ideals—such as immediacy, endurance, struggle, and vigilance—might inspire those they led. What went unstated, however, was that this Confucian idea was specific to Kinh/Viet cultural norms and, as such, might be unsuited to the Black River

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<sup>24</sup> Khu Tây Bắc, “Chính sách dân tộc thiểu số \_\_\_\_,” 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2745, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Pelley, “‘Barbarians’ and ‘Younger brothers’: The Remaking of Race in Postcolonial Vietnam,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 29 (1999): 374-391.

<sup>26</sup> “Thông tri...” 9 Nov 1953, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 14, yr 1953 (2001), 347.

region's different, multiple, and diverse social traditions.

In a modernizing twist, the Council also ordered cadres to institute social learning by incorporating principles of efficiency and progress into iterative waves of mobilization. Convening sessions to learn from experience and engage in self-criticism (*kiểm thảo*) singled out individual cadre in their work together, a technique designed to improve collective performance. In line with the broader development agenda and ongoing processes of bureaucratic rationalization, the Council prescribed tactics to achieve efficiency gains including organizational accounting, personnel inspection, and reduction of waste and corruption.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, the General Department of Supply organized trainings for cadres engaged in *dân công* work, like Hoàng Công Phẩm, to equip them with a proper ideological perspective, particularly with regards to emulation and efficiency.<sup>28</sup> Like the mechanism to track *dân công* service, these bureaucratic measures placed the burden of accountability onto an individual performing within a rationally organized institution. Accounting for one's duties individually through practices of self-criticism and public assessments were institutional means to maximize labor efficiency as well as mechanisms to discipline erroneous cadres and lazy laborers alike.

Empowered by these and other central directives, the military's General Department of Supply initially called for 7,730 tons of rice, of which 6,060 tons was to be collected principally in Sơn La and Lai Châu. By working with the Northwest Party Committee to collect rice locally, they hoped to reduce the amount consumed en route.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, many goods still had to be brought from downstream including 140

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 346-347.

<sup>28</sup> Nguyễn Văn Thuận, "Một số vấn đề về công tác chính trị ngành cung cấp trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ," in Tổng cục Hậu cần, *Công tác bảo đảm hậu cần trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 2004), 117.

<sup>29</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 326; Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Điện Biên Phủ: Rendezvous with History* (Hanoi: Thế giới Publishers, 2004b), 184-186.

tons salt, ammunition, medicine, etc.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, the Department promulgated and followed the guideline, “vigilantly mobilizing rice in place is foremost.”<sup>31</sup> Collecting provisions for the winter-spring campaign of 1953-54 commenced during 1953’s fall rice harvest. Unlike the soldiers and cadres who had “helped” the peasantry a year before to bring in the harvest, this time a pre-formed, specially tasked team showed up in villages to claim a portion of their crop.<sup>32</sup> By educating cultivators in the campaign’s official meaning—i.e., “to liberate the Northwest’s compatriots through all out resistance”—these teams secured commitments to pay the agricultural tax, perform *dân công* duties, and increase production.<sup>33</sup>

Notwithstanding all their centralized planning and localized preparation, enmeshed Party-military-state elites did not foresee a crucial contingency. By January, the forces amassed by the People’s Army were inadequate to lay siege to French fortifications in and around the Mường Thanh plain. All the preparatory work invested earlier in the anticipated winter-spring confrontation paled in comparison to the concrete scale and dimension necessary to attack fortified positions at Điện Biên Phủ. As a result, General Giáp, in consultation with Chinese advisors and the Front Command, decided to delay the battle’s opening and to change tactics from rapid mobile warfare to fixed position assault.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 184.

<sup>31</sup> Nguyễn Văn Thuận, “Một số...” in Tổng cục Hậu cần (2004), 113.

<sup>32</sup> Available sources answer questions and raise others regarding team composition and operations. Nguyễn Văn Thuận writes that Trần Lương developed a program to create teams of 5 cadres—one each from the General Department, Council, and Northwest Party Committee; a front logistics officer and a local recruit—who visited each village to mobilize provisions and labor. “Một số...” in Tổng cục Hậu cần (2004), 113. An official military history reports that in Dec-Jan a team composed of Party Committee and Department cadres visited each district and commune to collect rice. Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 326. Are these the same teams? Or did they work in sequence?

<sup>33</sup> Nguyễn Văn Thuận, “Một số...” in Tổng cục Hậu cần (2004), 113.

<sup>34</sup> Or, from “rapid attack, rapid solution” (*đánh nhanh, giải quyết nhanh*) to “steady attack, steady solution” (*đánh chắc, tiến chắc*). Cf., Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 95-113; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 376; Hoàng Văn Thái (1984), 48-53.

The tactical decision took into consideration how to maximize heavy artillery, the newest weapon in the People's Army's arsenal. If artillery would ultimately prove decisive in the overall balance of forces, then deploying these cannons only added to the military's civilian labor requirements. By digging these cannons into the mountains ringing the Mùòng Thanh plain, the People's Army used the terrain to concentrate firepower on the valley below. Yet just one 105mm howitzer required a team of 500 soldiers and *dân công* to drag it into position; and there were at least some 24 cannons of this type alone.<sup>35</sup> Though substantial, the labor requisitioned to haul artillery and munitions accounted for only a fraction needed just to use this one form of weaponry. Transporting these artillery pieces from afar, in turn, required even more roadcrews both to widen the switchbacks on Road 41 and to add still more length to the local road network.<sup>36</sup>

To make up for this contingent strategic adjustment, the DRV would have to mobilize still more labor and supplies. In early February, the Politburo agreed with the Front Command's analysis and instructed Interzone and Regional Party Committees to extend the campaign into the summer and, moreover, to "prioritize above all the mobilization of manpower and materials to supply the front."<sup>37</sup> Extending the campaign temporally multiplied initial provision targets and, as a result, the zone of mobilization expanded spatially. In keeping with guidelines to mobilize logistics in place, the Northwest's own population provided much of the military's labor and supplies. Delaying the battle's starting date, however, meant that local production was insufficient to fulfill overall demand. In line with the Politburo's instructions, collection intensified in neighboring regions of northern Vietnam—to the Việt Bắc,

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<sup>35</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 378-379. Fall reports a total of 48 105mm howitzers, all of which were captured in 1953 from the US Army during the Korean conflict (1967), 127.

<sup>36</sup> Artillery roads around the Mùòng Thanh plain measured 160 km. Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 187-188.

<sup>37</sup> "Chỉ thị của Bộ Chính trị: Động viên quân đội và nhân dân tiếp tục đánh giặc và phục vụ tiền tuyến," 8 Feb 1954, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 15, yr 1954 (2001), 15.

Interzones 3 and 4—and expanded abroad to China and Laos.<sup>38</sup> By the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign’s end in May 1954, the total amount of manpower and supplies mobilized in its support more than tripled the General Department of Supply’s early estimates.<sup>39</sup>

***Mobilization by numbers: counting, accounting, recounting***

How does one measure mobilization? More specifically, how did state agents measure claims made and to what effect? Strengthening DRV institutional capacity prior to and during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign enabled the calculation of state claims with new precision if not always with accuracy. In this section, I describe how an institutional capacity to *count* state demands and supplies, *accounted* for in a post-campaign report by the Council on Front Supply, has led subsequent analysts to *recount* these claims in a particular way: as “contributions” from various territorialized DRV units always already directed towards a national resistance effort. As such, counts and accounts have become the narrative fodder for recounting the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign. I use this analysis to set up a broader discussion, arguing that enumerating logistics within bounded time and given spaces neglects the social processes that made mobilization work. Not only did these processes predate and outlast the temporal limits of the campaign itself but they also transformed the means and ends of agrarian production lastingly.

On 10 July 1954 the Central Council for Front Supply led by Vice Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng issued a report providing, and celebrating, aggregate figures for military supply including provisions, labor, and means of transportation.<sup>40</sup>

Significantly, the Council’s “Report on work to serve the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign”

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<sup>38</sup> Cao Văn Lược, “Đường lối gương cao ngọn cờ độc lập dân tộc và chủ nghĩa xã hội với chiến thắng Điện Biên Phủ,” in *Viện sử học* (1985), 43.

<sup>39</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 186.

<sup>40</sup> Hội đồng cung cấp mặt trận Trung ương, “Báo cáo công tác phục vụ chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ,” 10 July 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692.

begins by demarcating the campaign's temporal limits to an eight month period. "We began in October 1953," reads the opening line, "by organizing the apparatus of supply and, simultaneously, by receiving the military's supply orders for winter-spring." In May 1954, on the occasion of the "enemy's greatest defeat" and when the "nation's resistance stepped forward into a new era," the Council's work ended.<sup>41</sup> The report also delineated the spatial realm of the "very expansive battlefield," i.e. "all zones and provinces" of northern Vietnam, within which and about which its narrative account unfolds.

This boundary-making is analytically significant. The report's temporal bounds excluded all the work that had preceded, and was continuing beyond, the campaign's restricted eight month time frame. Not included were the Northwest, Lao, or Nà Sản Campaigns and all the roadwork that accompanied them. Likewise, the spatial boundaries excluded all the provisions and supplies originating outside of "our nation," i.e. from Laos and China. Only by drawing boundaries did the Council make its accounting finite. Spatially, this finitude mapped onto a portion of the DRV's sovereign territorial claim—itself in the process of negotiation at Geneva and resulting in partition at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel in July 1954.<sup>42</sup> Predicated on this bounded counting and bureaucratic accounting did the Council's recounting of the campaign begin.

Having established boundaries, the past work of territorialized units (i.e., zones and provinces) and supply agencies could now, according to the report, serve another purpose: as a "lesson" (*bài học*). Presented at a conference summarizing the Council's experiences, the report's explicit aim was to educate government officials and agencies, to "learn from its work." This pedagogic intent rendered all the "difficulties," whether or not they had been "overcome," into instructive lessons

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<sup>41</sup> "This," followed the report, "is our honor. This is our victory." *Ibid.* p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Cf., Carlyle Thayer, *War by other means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam, 1954-60* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 1-10.

enabling future work to “succeed.”<sup>43</sup> Like data furnished through earlier military campaigns, this data could now be used by cadres, soldiers, and planners to forecast and execute future social interventions with increased productivity. The report formed the basis for another round of iterative state learning.

Unlike data from earlier campaigns, the Council’s institutionalized authority and centralized capacity enabled the calculation of data in a powerful way. Recall that President Hồ stated in July 1953 that he, the Party, and the Government would “watch over” (*theo dõi*) the efforts of *dân công* on the roads and bridges campaign.<sup>44</sup> He articulated an idea of surveillance embedded in the reorganization of state institutions. A year later, the Council noted how its “state apparatus” stationed at provincial and regional units had done just this, to “watch over normal, everyday work.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the Central Council embodied the outcome of institutional efforts to centralize bureaucratic authority, rationalize its practice, and expand its capacity. Now, the report summarized the work of monitoring and inspecting regional units, particularly with regards to commandeering bureaucratic personnel and securing agrarian resources.

Having rationalized its claims *in situ* through the work of its local branches, the conclusive report now rationalized them *ex post facto* with reams of statistics. In both instances, rationalization was simultaneously a bureaucratic procedure to increase efficiency and an ideological tactic to justify state claims. The Central Council collected, classified, and synthesized data from all localities and supply agencies. This one report aimed to summarize authoritatively, in exacting precision, *all* the results of this one campaign’s social mobilization. Armed with this authority, this centrally produced report has since overwritten, or outranked, all other locally produced reports

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<sup>43</sup> HỒCMTTW, “Báo cáo...” 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Thư gửi cán bộ và đồng bào dân công cầu đường,” 16 Sept 1953, *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập*, vol 7, yrs 1953-55 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 1996), 140.

<sup>45</sup> HỒCMTTW, “Báo cáo...” 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 3.



on the same topic.

Because the Council's July 1954 report has since become the standard reference for scholars and memory-makers alike, it is necessary to review its contents critically, particularly its rhetoric and use of aggregate statistics. The report's most frequently cited data is apportioned according to two metrics: the amount of supplies mobilized at the point of origin and the amount the Council turned over to the military's General Department of Supply.<sup>46</sup> By point of origin (*tận gốc*), the Council referred to territorialized state authorities, units responsible for amassing and counting the work of respective resident populations. By supplies, or logistics, the Council referred to mobilized foodstuffs (*thực phẩm*) and manpower (*sức người*), i.e. peasant producers' agricultural production, labor power, and means of transport. Table 6.1 illustrates the amount of foodstuffs mobilized at the point of origin.

Table 6.1: Food supplies mobilized at point of origin for Điện Biên Phủ Campaign, in metric tons.<sup>47</sup>

origin:	Northwest	Việt Bắc	Zone 3	Thanh Hoá	Total:
Rice	7,310	5,229	1,464	9,052	24,086
Meat	389	454	64	1,700 head	907
Dried foods		226	51	640	918
Sugar		42	2	18	62
Salt from Zone 3 and State Shops: 266					

Note, in particular, how the total of rice increased three-fold from the military's original estimate of 7,730 tons to an actual total of over 24,000 tons. Although the Council reported the total as 24,086 tons (far right column), note that the sum total of the four columns adds up to only 23,055 tons. It is unclear what accounts for this discrepancy. Note also that the total figure for meat does not include the

<sup>46</sup> On institutional division of labor, cf., Nguyễn An, "Công tác..." in *Viện sử học* (1985), 174-175.

<sup>47</sup> HỒCMTTW, "Báo cáo..." 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 4.

incommensurable number of animals (1700 head livestock) from Thanh Hoá province. Finally, shipped from the seaside drying-pans of the Red River Delta, salt retained its significance for visitors and residents alike.

Notwithstanding the large amount of total reported rice, it is safe to say that it underestimates the actual total. Other authors add another thousand tons.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, these statistics reflect the effects of spatial boundary-making. The figure for total rice excludes an estimated 2000 to 4000 tons of additional rice originating in Laos and China.<sup>49</sup> Recall all the rice that Hoàng Công Phẩm moved downstream from China along the Glorious Line. According to General Giáp, “this line alone allowed us to move the 1,700 metric tons of rice the Chinese donated to the campaign.”<sup>50</sup> In part, this spatial boundary-making was a function of bureaucratic decision-making: the military’s General Department of Supply supervised the Glorious Line, not the civilian Council on Front Supply.<sup>51</sup> Either way, this counting does not figure into the nationalist statistical narrative and, hence, goes uncounted.

These vast quantities of nationally-derived logistics elicited palpable pride on the part of the Council, an emotion to be shared with the government audience. The report declared:

The figures above are truly great: not only must a few enemies be horrified, but *we* must also be surprised. [These figures] speak to the great strength of *our* people, made *us* believe all the more that the revolution had invincible strength.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> For example, two sources list 25,056 tons rice mobilized at point of origin. Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 386; Cao Văn Lượng, “Đường lối...” in Viện sử học (1985), 43.

<sup>49</sup> Different sources offer different amounts. High-end figures for Lao and Chinese rice are 2000 and 1700 tons, respectively. Cf., Nguyễn Hào Hùng, “Chiến thắng Điện Biên Phủ--Ban Anh Hùng ca của Liên Minh đoàn kết chiến đấu Việt Nam-Lào-Campuchia” and Nguyễn An, “Công tác...” in Viện sử học, (1985), 161-2, 176. Vũ Văn Thông echoes the Chinese figure but states 300 tons from Laos. “Công tác vận tải và những kinh nghiệm vận dụng các phương thức vận tải trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ,” in Tổng cục Hậu cần (2004), 165.

<sup>50</sup> Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 190.

<sup>51</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 388.

<sup>52</sup> Italics added. HỒCMTTW, “Báo cáo...” 10 July 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 4.

Like other government documents, the rhetoric of state is revealing. In particular, this selection exemplifies how the use of pronouns produced and reproduced collectivities as well as normalized relations between them. The third person inclusive (“*ta*” or, we, us, our) refers to the agents of state themselves recognized collectively as “the state.” The inclusive “we” was, in fact, an exclusive ruling elite. Not only were these cadres and soldiers united against foreign “enemies” (French and, increasingly, American), they were also unified in exacting claims on *their* people, as if these political elites calling themselves “the state” could or did possess them. Even if the DRV did not, or could not, possess its subjects bodily, these elites nonetheless strived to own a portion of their subject population’s (“*our* people’s”) labor and production.

These pride-inspiring figures portended a lesson for the statist audience and, perhaps, a veiled warning for those who might challenge them militarily. The report cited the Central Command’s finding that, “the work of supply was one among several decisive factors in our victory.” Reflecting on this statement, “we realize,” reads the report, “from now to posterity,” that the duty and idea of supply must increasingly “pervade collective consciousness.”<sup>53</sup> The achievements the Council trumpeted functioned simultaneously as description and prescription for the government officials who all shared in the rhetorical category of a collective state “we.” They empowered themselves to claim resources from *their* population defined nationally and contained within *their* domain defined as sovereign territory. Anyone challenging this claim to sovereign territorial rule by breaking away and forming a separate republic—an item on the table at the Geneva negotiations—would face an elite willing and able to deploy a formidable army.

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

Because the gross tonnage of provisions above does not factor in the amount consumed en route, a second set of statistics reported what the Council actually delivered to “the front,” or what were in fact depots managed by the army’s General Department of Supply. The military unit managed two storage depots at Ba Khe (Văn Chấn) and Suối Rút (Mai Châu) to receive supplies and laborers from the Council, at which points its own personnel, like Hoàng Công Phẩm, assumed responsibility for delivery and distribution to combatants.<sup>54</sup> Although the General Department worked with the Northwest Administrative Committee to collect supplies and recruit labor directly in the Northwest Zone, the Council’s report includes these figures in the report’s aggregated statistics.<sup>55</sup> If these amalgamated statistics gloss over a complex—and sometimes acrimonious—bureaucratic division of labor, the figures nevertheless do other work: they represent a deliberate attempt to describe, *ex post facto*, prior military and civilian efforts as harmoniously unified.<sup>56</sup> Table 6.2 illustrates what supplies were delivered to the General Department’s front depots. Note that figures in the far right column do not appear in the report itself but are calculated by adding sums from each territory.

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> The General Department of Supply divided responsibilities internally by splitting into two branches, one charged with the “rear” (*hậu phương*) and another with the “front” (*tiền phương*) pivoting on supply management to and from the depots. Cf., Võ Nguyên Giáp (2004b), 183-6; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 326-327, 388. Nguyễn An, “Công tác...” in Viện sử học (1985), 174-175.

<sup>56</sup> For example, in its year 1954 plans the military’s Central Party Command criticized the civilian supply agency’s “simplistic organization” before the Politburo. Tổng quân ủy, “Kế hoạch quân sự năm 1954,” 20 Dec 1953, in Đảng ủy Quân sự Trung ương, *Một số văn kiện chỉ đạo chiến cuộc đông xuân 1953-1954 và chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Quân Đội Nhân dân, 2004), 235.

Table 6.2: Supplies delivered to the front by point of origin, in metric tons.<sup>57</sup>

origin:	Northwest	Việt Bắc	Zone 3	Thanh Hoá	Total:
Rice	7143	4660	1,485	3,994**	17649*
Meat	389	394	33	18	834
Dried foods		177	51	320	548
Vegetables	7-800				7-800
Salt			126	16	142
Sugar		42	2	18	62

\* Calculated by the author, including 367 tons of rice from Thanh Hoá.

\*\* Reported figure does not include 367 tons of rice provided to road crews.

Based on these data, the Council singled out each territory for praise with respect to its particular form of “achievement.” Above all, the Council pointed to the Northwest Zone’s provision of rice as the “largest achievement,” because this territory had surpassed its target and fulfilled “one half” of all the military’s requests. The Council commended the Việt Bắc for rapidly providing dried foods and bicycles far above its officially acknowledged capacity. Zone 3, or the western Red River Delta, earned praise for salt. The province of Thanh Hoá earned commendation for providing large quantities of rice at crucial moments of scarcity.<sup>58</sup>

These second set of figures appear to validate the policy guideline of mobilization in place. The total amount of rice mobilized in Thanh Hoá (9,052 tons) was reduced by *dân công* consumption to only 3,994 tons when the shipment reached front depots. By comparison, the amount of rice originating in the Northwest Zone declined by only a small fraction, from 7,310 tons to 7,143. The report neglects to mention what accounts for a disparity in collected salt (266 tons) versus delivered salt (142 tons). Perhaps the unaccounted for 124 tons was used for legitimization work, i.e. to drive a renewed reciprocal exchange? Or perhaps the salt was used to process meat?

Notwithstanding their precision, summary statistics on provisions delivered to

<sup>57</sup> HĐCCMTTW, “Báo cáo...” 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 4-5.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

front depots display inconsistencies that call their validity into question. Take, for example, the figure for total delivered rice. The Council's Report claimed that the Northwest Zone provided "one half" of military requirements. Secondary sources agree with this claim, citing a total of 14,950 tons, of which the Northwest's figure of 7,143 tons would, indeed, be approximately half.<sup>59</sup> Yet a simple calculation (i.e., summing across table two's first row) amounts to a figure of 17,649 tons. Where, then, does the oft-cited figure of 14,950 tons come from? What accounts for the 2,800 ton disparity?<sup>60</sup> Or compare the two figures for rice from Zone 3 (i.e., 1464 tons at point of origin vs. 1485 tons delivered): given *dân công* consumption over a several hundred kilometer trek, how this amount of rice increased defies explanation.

At first glance, the Council's reported figures for labor and transportation appear more consistent. The report estimates the number of *dân công* active during the campaign from four regions at over 260,000 individuals. This figure for total *dân công* is one of the few statistics cited by secondary sources without deviation. Note that figures in the far right column of Table 6.3 do not appear in the report itself but are calculated by adding the sums from each territory.

Table 6.3: Laborers and means of transportation by point of origin.<sup>61</sup>

origin:	Northwest	Việt Bắc	Zone 3	Thanh Hoá	Total:*
<i>dân công</i>	31,818	36,519	6,400	186,714	261,451
bicycles		865	1,712	11,214**	13,791

\* Calculated by the author.

\*\* Includes 1,400 bicycles from Nghệ An Province.

Note the figures for the Northwest Zone's labor: 31, 818 people reportedly worked on

<sup>59</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 385; Đỗ Hữu Lễ, "Quân và dân Tây Bắc với công tác bảo đảm hậu cần cho chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ," in Tổng cục Hậu cần (2004), 231.

<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the larger figure was reduced by additional porter consumption while shuttling between depots and battlefield?

<sup>61</sup> HỒCMTTW, "Báo cáo..." 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 4-5.

the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign as “short term *dân công*” and performed “1,296,078 labor days spent on roadwork and storehouse duty.”<sup>62</sup> If accurate, then 10% of the frontier’s population performed *dân công* labor for an average of 42 days per person; this calculated average, however, smooths out the localities where participation rates exceeded 10%. Secondary sources repeat these regional and aggregate labor statistics, adding that all *dân công* performed a total of 14 million labor days.<sup>63</sup> Or, if so, every laborer worked an average of 54 days.<sup>64</sup>

As planners had hoped, using pack bicycles increased the load efficiency of each porter. Though the total number of bikes varies substantially by source, the Council estimated they carried one third the campaign’s total tonnage.<sup>65</sup> Certainly, the 628 (or so) Molotova trucks plying the supply lines meant that not all supplies arrived at the front through the efforts of heroic individuals either walking or pushing overloaded bicycles.<sup>66</sup> Yet it was such so-called “primitive” forms of transport that proved best able to maneuver around broken roads and bridges; to evade strafing runs, bombing raids, and napalm attacks.<sup>67</sup>

If nothing else, the Council’s aggregate labor statistics for the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign reveal an astonishing fact: the number of people mobilized was greater than the population of the entire Northwest Zone. At this time, the population of the Northwest Zone—including those in contested territories—was estimated at between

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Cao Văn Lượng et al, *Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp của quân và dân Khu Tây Bắc* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 2003), 436-437; Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 384-386. Or, alternatively, 18,301,570 days in Cao Văn Lượng, “Đường lối...” in Viện sử học (1985), 43.

<sup>64</sup> Another source lists average *dân công* laborer service time at over 100 days. Nguyễn Hữu Hợp & Nguyễn Hữu Đạo, “Sức mạnh...” in Viện sử học (1985): 98.

<sup>65</sup> HỒCMTTW, “Báo cáo...” 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 18. Council data, illustrated in table 2, lists total number of pack bicycles at 13,791. An official military history reports a higher total of 20,000. Cf, Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 385.

<sup>66</sup> Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 384. Nguyễn Hữu Hợp & Nguyễn Hữu Đạo, “Sức mạnh...” in Viện sử học (1985), 97.

<sup>67</sup> Nguyễn An, “Công tác...” in Viện sử học (1985), 177.

300,000 to 320,000 residents.<sup>68</sup> A conservative estimate places the total number of people mobilized, Vietnamese soldiers and laborers alike, at a minimum of 310,000; the actual number was undoubtedly much larger.<sup>69</sup> At any given time over the eight month period of the campaign, therefore, the population of the Northwest Zone increased by approximately 1/3<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>70</sup> Whatever the exact figure, this added population placed a tremendous burden on local food supplies.

Where did these figures come from? Historicizing the genealogy of precise figures reported in the Council's report traces, also, the DRV's internal structure and points to the location of ultimate authority. The following example illustrates a feedback loop: the Council's centralized authority among local and competing state agencies empowered it, also, to stake claims on truth; in turn, this truth-claim reinforced the center's claim to legitimacy.

In June 1954, a month prior to the Council's final report, the Political Commissar of the Northwest Zone's Party Committee summarized total labor and means of transportation supplied by the region's residents across all waves (*đợt*) of the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign. Nguyễn Khánh cautioned that these figures, gleaned from

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<sup>68</sup> Low-end estimate from Phan Mỹ, "Báo cáo..." 22 Dec 1952, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 456, p. 1-2. High-end estimate from Anonymous, "Tình hình khái quát về Khu Tự trị dân tộc Thái Mèo ở Tây Bắc," May 1955, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 22, p. 4.

<sup>69</sup> That is, 260,000 *dân công* and approximately 53,000 People's Army logisticians, soldiers, and officers. The latter figure, to this day, remains obscure. Vũ Văn Thông estimates 53,800 soldiers in "Công tác..." in Tổng cục Hậu cần (2004), 157. Howard Simpson estimates 47,500 soldiers in *Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot* (Washington: Brassey's Inc., 1994), 35. The calculated figure of 310,000 does not include an estimated 500,000 women working to support the soldiers from home, the 2,800 Youth Volunteers (*Thanh niên xung phong*), nor myriad others serving elsewhere. On women, cf., Nguyễn Hữu Hợp & Nguyễn Hữu Đạo, "Sức mạnh..." in Viện sử học (1985), 98-100. On Youth Volunteers cf., "Công tác phục vụ chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ qua một tài liệu lưu trữ" accessed 27 April 2009 at: <<http://www.archives.gov.vn/Pages/Tin%20chi%20ti%E1%BA%Bft.aspx?itemid=94&listId=c2d480fb-e285-4961-b9cd-b018b58b22d0&ws=content/>>.

<sup>70</sup> Author's estimate from cited data. In addition to approximately 13,000 French-allied and 50,000 People's Army combatants, perhaps 30,000 or so extra-local *dân công* were present at any given time. The 1/3<sup>rd</sup> figure is based on calculating total additional population divided by the resident population: (13,000 + 50,000 + 30,000) / 300,000 = 31%.



the region's subordinate districts and provinces, were "not yet adequate." He reported, provisionally, that 31,818 *dân công* laborers had performed 1,296,078 days of labor (*nhật công*); in addition to pedestrian transport, these laborers had used 872 pack-horses and 83 watercraft.<sup>71</sup> Regardless of his caveat and any accompanying concerns regarding the data's accuracy, the Council then re-reported these same, precise figures as "summaries" of all means of transport and all labor performed by the region's residents.<sup>72</sup> The Central Council bestowed tentative estimates with truth-value. To complete the loop, local authorities back in the Northwest, from the Party Committee in October 1954 to mass organizations in December, re-re-reported these same, precise figures, implicitly citing the Council's report as the final, authoritative source.<sup>73</sup> By then, it did not matter that the Zone's Committee had at its disposal alternative, and perhaps more accurate, sets of figures to enumerate the region's logistical "contributions" to the Campaign. What mattered, by contrast, was the Central Government's role as the final arbiter of "our people's great energies," as though the center alone could speak on behalf of the nation.<sup>74</sup>

Statistics have a history, and a life, of their own. Since its original presentation, the authority with which this report was produced has meant that its content has been reproduced—warts and all—in all manner of government reports, scholarly books and articles, and official histories.<sup>75</sup> Even those very few sources that report figures incompatible with the Central Council's still adhere to the temporal and spatial

<sup>71</sup> Nguyễn Kháng, Khu ủy Tây Bắc, "Báo cáo kiểm điểm công tác 6 tháng đầu năm 1954," 24 June 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 519, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> HỒCMTTW, "Báo cáo..." 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 4-5.

<sup>73</sup> Cf., Lê Trung Đình, "Báo cáo kiểm điểm công tác xây dựng Khu Tây Bắc từ ngày thành lập đến nay (7/1952-7/1954) trước hội nghị kháng chiến hành chính và chuyên môn khu hợp lần đầu tiên," 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 12; Bùi Sán, Bộ phận Phụ trách công tác dân tộc trong Ban Mặt trận, "Báo cáo thực hiện chính sách dân tộc trong năm 1954," 29 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1465, p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> Or, "...sức vĩ đại của nhân dân ta." HỒCMTTW, "Báo cáo..." 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Cf., Cao Văn Lược, "Đường lối..." in *Viện sử học* (1985), 43; *Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam*, vol II (1995), 384-386; Đỗ Hữu Lễ, "Quân và dân..." in *Tổng cục Hậu cần* (2004), 230-231.

boundaries its report established for measuring and quantifying resources allocated to the campaign. For example, Cao Văn Lương's 2003 history of the French War in the Northwest Zone cites the Sơn La province military command's 1995 history of the French War in Sơn La regarding "voluntary" mobilization for the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign. Both report that the residents of Sơn La mobilized 21,867 *dân công* who performed 2,434,759 labor days using 83 watercraft and 872 packhorses.<sup>76</sup> If so, the residents of this one province alone provided double the amount of labor days compared to what the Council reported for the entire region's four provinces! As if to highlight a clash of statistics, the number of watercraft and packhorses these authors report for Sơn La is exactly the same as the figures Nguyễn Khánh and the Council attributed to the entire region.

Quantifying the total amount of civilian labor and provisions required to support this one military campaign based on this *ex post facto* report (and others like it) raises a number of problems. Arithmetically, the Council's statistics frequently do not add up. Yet analysts, historians, and memory-makers continue to cite their figures. Though subsequent sources sometimes offer divergent quantities, the report remains the authoritative source. As such, the Central Council's report retains its authority even if its statistics are inaccurate. Indeed, not all numbers were, or are, created equal: the greater the authority of the enumerating institution, the more authoritative its accounting. Regardless of validity, the hierarchy of institutional authority determined, and still does, whose numbers count.

Further, the Central Council report's temporal and spatial boundary-making delineated a realm of accounting that discounted all else. Included in the realm of accounting were four territories over eight months. Excluded was anything and anyone

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<sup>76</sup> Cao Văn Lương et al (2003), 442; Bộ Chỉ huy Quân sự tỉnh Sơn La, *Sơn La: Lịch sử kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp (1954-1954)* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1995), 171.

from anywhere outside this realm's spatial limits. Even within these restricted spatial boundaries, also excluded was anything and anyone from anytime exceeding the realm's temporal restrictions. Spatially, measuring this one campaign within only four territorial units neglects any other campaigns happening simultaneously, for example, in Laos or the Central Highlands; as well as any goods and labor gleaned from international, or other intranational, sources.<sup>77</sup> Temporally, aggregate figures from this one campaign do not account for prior mobilizations in the same territories, such as the roads and bridges campaign of spring-summer 1953, that played a crucial role in the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign's outcome. Nor do they account for any goods and labor directed towards Điện Biên Phủ, or in its name, after May 1954.

Even within the realm of accounting's strict limits, the reported figures only account for what regional cadres could account for and did in fact count. For example, gross figures for the Northwest Zone (7,311 tons rice, 389 tons meat, and 700-800 tons vegetables) did not include whatever its peoples gave directly to the soldiers, i.e. bypassing the state supply system.<sup>78</sup> In other words, unless an office of state mediated, and accounted for, any given exchange between peasant and state representative, the foodstuff or unit of labor did not count. Ironically, the spirit of such informal exchange came closer to a pure "contribution" than the formal measures used to collect what grain the regional units collected and the Council reported.

In spite of such problems with the practice of statistics, this statist enumeration and accounting does do other things. Statistics as given social facts emphasize effects over processes, ends over means. Enumerating and accounting illustrate the purposive efforts of state agencies to rationalize claims on society; and to improve the efficiency

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<sup>77</sup> The Central Highlands Campaign, for example, required upwards of 200,000 laborers and 6 million labor days. Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995), 385.

<sup>78</sup> Phan Sỹ Phúc, "Điện Biên Phủ - nơi hội tụ sức mạnh của cả nước," *Báo Nhân dân online*, 2 April 2009. Retrieved 8 Apr 2009 at: <http://www.nhandan.org.vn/tinbai/?top=37&sub=50&article=144418>

with which they secured them. Such enumeration provided state agents with the tools, first, to know and measure society and, then, to direct its change in particular ways.<sup>79</sup>

The report's rationalizing impulse also contributed to the reification of spatial and temporal boundaries. Temporally, the report and its followers made and remade the campaign as a discrete event ending with the final defeat of colonial rule and all forms of colonialism.<sup>80</sup> Spatially, the report cast and recast the territorial units as uniformly representative of the populations they contained and attributed agency to spatial categories as such. The report personified these units, imbuing abstract spatial units with human-like abilities: for example, "The Northwest fulfilled its targets..."; or "The Việt Bắc for several years now has contributed the most to the resistance..."<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the powerful recapitulation of the Black River region as the "Northwest" joined and rejoined a frontier to DRV territories and more loyal populations. Though these boundaries may be a matter of representation, they nonetheless shaped the dominant narrative of nation, state, and society in and of Vietnam. The ongoing practices and processes of mobilization made and remade these narrative boundaries constitutive of everyday power relations and forms of rule.

From an analytical perspective, what this preoccupation with counting, accounting, and recounting overlooks are processes and practices that underlay and conditioned mobilization. Measuring mobilizations' intended effects works to obscure legitimation work and unintended outcomes. Even when the Council's report did admit to procedural problems, these are presented as lessons to inform and improve the outcomes of any future mobilizations. For example, reported problems included: mobilizing pregnant women and war-wounded as *dân công*; confronting protesting peasants anxious about surrendering even more scarce foodstocks; imprisoning

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<sup>79</sup> James Scott, *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>80</sup> Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

<sup>81</sup> HĐCCMTTW, "Báo cáo..." 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-1954), file no. 1692, p. 4.

potential recruits who planned on shirking *dân công* duty; punishing landlords by forcing them to perform menial labor. Cadres in audience were admonished to learn from these mistakes, to improve collaboration and communication, to demonstrate care for the people, and—above all—to improve productivity.<sup>82</sup>

Statistics served to euphemize state power to make and enforce claims on “our people,” or an emerging national society composed of peoples sometimes ambivalent about being counted as such. The obsession with calculability contributed, and still contributes, towards the making of a national economy and, also, towards the silencing of its political project.<sup>83</sup> To count the work of men and women as so many laborers and days of labor is an act of abstraction, one that presupposes their separability from their households and farms as “free” labor. Similarly, abstracting the fruits of their labor as so much tonnage of supplies presupposes the separability of the means of subsistence from sites of social reproduction.<sup>84</sup>

Such abstract accounting does little to describe the concrete, and often violent, processes with which labor and provisions were loosened from the local population, claimed by state, and allocated to the military. To focus on labor *qua* labor or provisions *qua* provisions distracts from a description and analysis of how mobilization worked in practice and as process. Though mystified in past and ongoing projects to normalize its practice, mobilization deserves greater scrutiny—both as the historically specific expression of power relations and the concrete process through which ideological constructs of “state” and “society” figured in everyday life.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p. 17-20.

<sup>83</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 83.

<sup>84</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1973); Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction* (New York: Blackwell, 1987).

### *Mobilization in Places*

The legions of French paratroopers who dropped from the sky in November 1953 to occupy the Mường Thanh plain landed on fields laden with ripening rice. The Black Thái farmers who had planted and tended these fields lost much of their crop.<sup>85</sup> In what would be remembered as the drama of Điện Biên Phủ, the opening act featured soldiers walking on, crushing, and burning stalks of rice. It was a collision between forceful movements of armies and the everyday work of farmers. In the midst of all the combat to come, rice remained a staple of struggle both for the soldiers and cadres who claimed and consumed it as well as for the farmers who cultivated, harvested, husked, and hauled it.

The two armies squaring off against one another deployed very different strategies to feed and move themselves. While French forces used coercive practices and air transport, the People's Army gathered food by securing claims locally and moving stores overland. These divergent logistics strategies drew on, and generated, very different relations of rule. What is relevant to this discussion of resource mobilization and state formation lies less in the battle itself than in underlying relations that enabled these armies to fight. Though the battle itself was spatially and temporally limited, the underlying campaign to support the People's Army rested on the DRV's territorialized authority, itself socially produced over a longer duration across a broader spatial scale.

The People's Army's advances in late 1953, once again, shifted the terrain of state making and social mobilization in the Black River region. In contrast to the abstract spatial idea of the "Northwest" recounted in histories and statistical figures, the DRV's territorialized authority was deeply uneven and violently contested. Not

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<sup>85</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, UBHC tỉnh Lai Châu, "Báo cáo tổng kết công tác năm 1954," 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 7; Fall (1967), 10, 17-18, 53.

only was the emerging national frontier criss-crossed by militarized zones of front and rear. Moreover, how a panoply of DRV institutions worked there hinged on a reappraisal of the Black River region's internalized territory. The Northwest Zone itself was reapportioned according to the revolutionary spatial matrix, i.e. zones considered free, recently liberated, or temporarily occupied. Expressed temporally and teleologically, this tripartite zonation was based on the degree of opposition to DRV rule or, alternatively, the degree to which DRV institutions had and might still gain legitimate rule among resident populations.

*Remaking the Northwest in a time of war*

By December 1953—notwithstanding internalized combat in Lai Châu province generally, its district of Điện Biên Phủ particularly, and along the Lào and Chinese borders—DRV officials considered most of the Northwest a “free zone.” Sites of organized anti-colonial resistance since 1948 and “newly liberated” during the 1952 Northwest Campaign, the provinces of Sơn La, Lào Cai, and Yên Bái now had established state structures vested with institutional authority. These sites were nominally, or assertedly, “free.” The Central Party Committee and Government ordered the Northwest Zone's Committee to prioritize two tasks broadly: serve the front and conduct Mass Mobilization.<sup>86</sup> The Zone's regional leadership, through subordinate Resistance and Administrative Committees, integrated these tasks with ongoing programs, such as agricultural taxation, increasing production, and (limited) social transformation. New to this agenda, and significant with regards to mobilization, were coercive measures to eliminate any opposition to the DRV's militarized state-making project.

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<sup>86</sup> Lê Trung Đình, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 9. Or, “to strike the enemy and implement land reform” in Lê Trung Đình, Khu ủy Tây Bắc, “Báo cáo một năm công tác của Khu Tây Bắc,” 31 Jan 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 519, p. 1.

Though mobilization for the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign figures in historical documents as a separate line item, the effort to collect labor and provisions unfolded simultaneously with projects to discipline class enemies and punish disloyal subjects. In September 1953, Mass Mobilization in, and of, the Northwest's "ethnic minority areas" had commenced according to a particular program: although emphasizing an "ethnic united front," the agenda allowed for limited disciplining of internalized class enemies.<sup>87</sup> Only in select areas of Lào Cai and Yên Bái did cadres lead poor and middle peasants to demand rent and interest reduction and "overthrow wicked, tyrannical landlords."<sup>88</sup> Yet their efforts produced nearly disastrous unintended consequences. Only 68 class enemies were found and tried. Even these modest results among ethnically diverse peoples (Kinh, Tàì, Thái, Mường, Nung, etc.) resulted in "deep ethnic contradictions." Of 43 communes mobilized to demand rent and interest reduction, 26 communes contained elites ("landlords") who counter-organized against the DRV's local government, sabotaged its policies, and prepared to "welcome the French."<sup>89</sup> Even co-configured efforts to "build local government" met with mixed results. Through public denunciations, trials, and asset seizures, itinerant cadres identified 209 local recruits (*bắt rế*) and organized local government agencies and Farmers' Councils. Yet all these recruits "were brought into old organizations" and, instead of denouncing "wicked" landlords, they chose to resist any efforts by "determined" peasants.<sup>90</sup> In other words, organizing predicated on class allegiance backfired and new political institutions remained subject to old relations of rule.

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<sup>87</sup> Anonymous, "Đề nghị về việc vận động quần chúng ở vùng dân tộc thiểu số mới giải phóng thuộc Tây Bắc," Sept 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1258.

<sup>88</sup> Or, "đả đảo địa chủ cường hào gian ác." Districts (provinces) included Trấn Yên and Lục Yên (Yên Bái) and Văn Bàn (Lào Cai).

<sup>89</sup> Nine communes "did not yet have data" which may have been an excuse for local officials not to report on wayward popular responses to mobilization. Elite-supported organizations included the *Liên hiệp nghĩa binh chống Cộng* (United anti-communist Insurgent Army), *Nông dân Đảng* (Peasants' Party), *Liên đoàn Thanh niên Công giáo* (Catholic Youth Union).

<sup>90</sup> Le Trung Dinh, "Báo cáo..." 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 12.



More significantly and broadly, if agrarian reform was predicated on differentiations and gradations of class, then the list of enemies had by now expanded to exceed the boundaries and prescribed categories of class allegiance. In February 1954, Lê Duẩn ordered all Party executives (*cấp ủy*) throughout claimed DRV territory to “watch over” (*theo dõi*) and “investigate” local political activities through intensified police work and heightened popular vigilance. “Struggling against spies, commandos, bandits, traitors, reactionaries, and cruel tyrants,” explained the rising Party star, was necessary “to protect the rear and serve the front.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, militarized statemaking articulated with agrarian reform to institutionalize and legitimate intensified coercive surveillance—the literal policing—of politically suspect individuals.

What Lê Duẩn articulated was, in fact, an ongoing program empowering cadres and state institutions to “watch over” national subjects. As early as October 1953, Mass Mobilization in the Northwest meant that soldiers and policemen joined cadres and select peasants to “crush traitors to the Vietnamese nation” (*trấn áp Việt gian phản quốc*), i.e. to capture and imprison subjects of suspect loyalty; and to “wipe out bandits” (*tiêu phi*), i.e. to destroy pro-French militias and organized opposition. Only in part a reaction to the persistence of landed elites in the Northwest Zone’s local government, central and regional officials moreover used coercive force to eliminate political opposition to DRV rule across the Northwest’s “free zones.” Presumably, the same elites who counter-organized against the DRV in Lào Cai and Yên Bái found

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<sup>91</sup> Lê Duẩn, “Chỉ thị của ban bí thư về việc tấn công lãnh đạo công tác công an,” 20 Feb 1954, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 15, yr 1954 (2001), 24-26. Lê Duẩn was a Politburo member representing Vietnam’s southern region, or colonial Cochinchina. After the French war and following splits between Hồ Chí Minh and Trường Chinh over land reform, Lê Duẩn replaced Trường Chinh as Party Secretary in 1958. He was a principle advocate for waging war to reunite northern (DRV) and southern (RVN) Vietnams. Cf., Liên-Hằng Nguyễn, “The War Politburo: North Vietnam’s Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1 (2006), 9-11.

themselves targets for punishment or murder. By the end of 1953, 1609 “traitors” had been captured and 406 tried; meanwhile, some 4,000 “bandits” had been killed.<sup>92</sup>

All these violent programs, and the vigor with which cadres, soldiers, policemen, and select peasants pursued them, accelerated over the course of the campaign and through 1954.<sup>93</sup> In July 1954, the Zone institutionalized a committee named, euphemistically, “Internal Affairs,” to coordinate what they called “watching over” individuals (and alternately rewarding or punishing them), “supervising” local government, and “surveilling” the masses.<sup>94</sup> That such militarized policing continued after the conclusion of the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign in May 1954 demonstrates that its goal was not only to pursue military triumph on this one battlefield. According to a committee charged with Ethnic Business, the so-called “problem of unity,” by which they meant evident *disunity*, justified the ongoing “capture and killing of bandits,” some of whom escaped to Laos. Murdering or intimidating politically wayward subjects worked explicitly to secure the Northwest Zone’s strategic, yet vulnerable, territory in preparation for making it the DRV’s first Autonomous Zone in 1955.<sup>95</sup>

These violent programs belie the Ethnic Policy’s prescription that “Vietnam’s ethnic majority and minority share a singular enemy,” i.e., an unreconstructed French colonial and American imperialist.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, the enemy was no longer just a foreigner. Now, by class *and* allegiance, there were enemies within and amongst an assertedly Vietnamese nation—persons to be identified, prosecuted, jailed, and, perhaps, killed. On the one hand, these programs had an intended effect: coercion against unpopular

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<sup>92</sup> Le Trung Đình, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 9-10, 13.

<sup>93</sup> Viện Khoa học Công an, “Công tác bảo vệ trong cuộc tiến công chiến lược đông xuân 1953-1954 và trong chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ,” in *Viện sử học* (1985), 132-147; Cao Văn Lượng et al (2003), 451-471.

<sup>94</sup> Quang Văn Dai, UBHC Khu Tây Bắc, “Công tác Nội chính năm 1954,” 3 May 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1401, p. 2, 16.

<sup>95</sup> Bùi Sán, “Báo cáo...” 29 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1465, p. 2, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Khu Tây Bắc, “Chính sách...” 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2745, p. 2.

landlords, traitors, and other alleged deviants resulted in consent or intimidation among subjects whom these programs benefited or bypassed. On the other hand, these programs had unintended effects. All the class-based organizing and violent disciplinary activities were replete with “errors,” an ominous indication that, in this frenzied atmosphere, cadres failed to restrain themselves or to moderate radicalized peasant aspirations.<sup>97</sup> Particularly with regards to the so-called ethnic contradictions, these problems appeared to confirm why central and regional elites had, over the previous year, decided to withhold from the Northwest a radical agrarian reform agenda. Attacking an entrenched local elite frontally only served to unify opposition against any efforts to displace their rule.

Available contemporaneous documents do not dwell on the problems of collecting provisions and labor from these free zones. With revealing exceptions, this archival silence speaks as mute testament to the effective, if not violent, institutionalization and legitimation of DRV rule preceding and accompanying the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign. What Nguyễn Khánh had described as a project a year earlier, to remake the Northwest’s population into a military reserve, appeared now to bear fruit. In general, it appears that labor service had been normalized: having served several earlier military campaigns, performed multiple forms of *dân công* labor (roadwork, irrigation, transportation), and served the same officialized lords for years, peasant subjects were presumably accustomed to working on behest of nation and behalf of state. When the campaign began, village-based public assessments (*bình nghị*) apportioned the duties of local residents, assigning them principally to

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<sup>97</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 24 Jun 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no 519, p. 10, 12; Le Trung Dinh, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 10, 12-13; Nguyễn Khánh, Khu ủy Tây Bắc, “Báo cáo tháng 5, 1954,” 16 June 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 519, p. 6.

roadcrews.<sup>98</sup> They maintained and repaired the transportation arteries that linked the front to secure territories and, in so doing, contributed towards binding still tighter their homeland to downstream neighbors and a rising center.

Two exceptions to this general observation indicate major shifts during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign and, furthermore, illustrate the increased capacity of state to call on additional, and potentially troublesome, sources of labor. First, Thái women served as *dân công* at a much higher rate than previously, especially in road work, angering patriarchal traditional leaders and delighting egalitarian, productivity-minded cadres. In Tuần Giáo District, a site subject to DRV bureaucratic norms and procedures since late 1952, women had initially been reluctant to “serve the campaign” but, over 1954, gradually started to process rice, heft weaponry, and work on roadcrews. Reflecting on these changes, Lò Văn Hặc praised women’s increased participation in off-farm work as a “general advance among the broader population.” Yet he admitted that not all officials shared his views. “Women are certainly not able to do *dân công*,” stated the village chief Lò Thi Suong who continued, “were the Government to capture and kill them, I would just put it aside.”<sup>99</sup>

Ironically, Lò Văn Hặc—an old feudal elite par excellence—positioned himself in relation to his peer as a modernizing figure. Yet their perspectives were not that far apart: just as the Chairman of Lai Châu Province’s Administrative Committee praised women for their potential as laborers, the village chief dismissed them as not worthy of his care. Tellingly, there is no recorded impression from the women themselves, only these divergent judgments from male Thái officialized lords. Like the idea of liberation more broadly, the DRV’s egalitarian gender ideology worked

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<sup>98</sup> Le Trung Dinh, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 10; Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ Tỉnh Lai Châu, “Vai trò...” in *Viện sử học* (1985), 112.

<sup>99</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 6.

ambivalently: potentially freeing Thái women from old forms of patriarchy but, at the same time, engendering new forms of state servitude.

Second, in contrast to earlier forms of rule, DRV cadres and People's Army logistics officers climbed the hills during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign and recruited *dân công* labor among highland communities. This was a significant departure from French colonial and Thái Federation rule during which time Hmong and Dao peoples were exempt from *corvée*. Recall how Hoàng Công Phẩm remembered a Hmong woman on his crew who cried inconsolably. Although his colleague at the time provided a culturalist explanation for her misery—that Hmong people were used to dancing and singing by night—archival sources provide a different explanation. Nguyễn Khánh observed,

Mobilizing all the Hmong compatriots to descend to the plains without making special considerations for their circumstances—they are accustomed neither to hot weather nor to going far for long—has already impacted the compatriots' health; some return home wasting away, sick and dying, such that the political influence is not good.<sup>100</sup>

Mobilizing Hmong people to descend from the heights and perform *dân công* duties in the valleys, on the road, or by the riverside caused them misery, frequent illness, and sometimes death. It is hard to imagine that any amount of “special considerations,” except perhaps continued exemption from labor service, might have prevented these circumstances. What the circuitous observation about a “not good political influence” makes clear, however, is that Hmong communities recognized a contradiction: by returning *dân công* laborers home in poor health and near death, the DRV failed to adhere to its own rhetoric of caring for or watching over national subjects. More than a short-term failure, increasing claims on Hmong people's bodies (as labor power) and,

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<sup>100</sup> Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo...” 24 Jun 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no 519, p. 3.

in time, their agricultural produce (as tax revenue) bore long term consequences for the rising regime's political legitimacy among Hmong communities.<sup>101</sup>

In addition to *dân công* labor duty, the agricultural tax remained the principal means through which the DRV secured claims on agrarian resources. To collect provisions for war in 1953-54, the Northwest's commune and district level committees used present and future agricultural taxation on wet-rice fields to collect grains and foodstuffs for the military. Overall, the implementation of fiscal year 1953's agricultural tax resulted in a collection of 14,400 tons of rice and, supposedly, "followed an orderly routine."<sup>102</sup> Once farmers delivered a portion of their rice harvest to local storehouses, the military's distribution network—relying on local *dân công* labor—ferried it to combatants.<sup>103</sup> In areas where farmers "loaned" provisions to the military during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign, the Northwest Zone used the subsequent round of taxation in fiscal 1954 to amortize accumulated state debt: half a given peasant's credit counted towards the assessed tax; the Ministry of Finance amortized remaining debt by providing supplies of salt and cloth through State Shops.<sup>104</sup>

Underlying this general portrait of how taxation supplied the military with food were ongoing spatial disparities in implementation, widespread discontent, and elite resistance—all of which prompted a renewed cycle of state learning. Through the campaign and for fiscal years 1954 and 1955, swidden fields enjoyed a tax holiday,

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<sup>101</sup> Cf., UBHC KTTT, "Báo cáo bổ sung về khôi phục kinh tế cải thiện dân sinh," 11 Feb 1957, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg, file no. 17, p. 4-5, 14; UBHC KTTT, "Báo cáo công tác cải thiện đời sống vật chất và tinh thần cho nhân dân các d.t.," 10 Jan 1957, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2765, p. 7-10; UBHC KTTT, "Báo cáo công tác cải thiện đời sống vật chất và tinh thần cho nhân dân các d.t.," Jan 1957, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 3215, p. 6-10.

<sup>102</sup> Le Trung Đình, "Báo cáo..." 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 11.

<sup>103</sup> Lee San, UBHC Tỉnh Lai Châu, "Báo cáo tổng kết thuế N.N." 31 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, Phòng UBHC Tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 102, p.1; Ban Chấp hành Đảng bộ Tỉnh Lai Châu, "Vai trò..." in Viện sử học (1985), 112.

<sup>104</sup> Khu Tây Bắc, "Báo cáo công tác thuế nông nghiệp 1954," 27 Apr 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 3.

exempting most highland communities.<sup>105</sup> Whether intentional or not, suspending tax payments appeared to enable cadres and local government institutions to maintain harmonious relations with Hmong, Dao, and other swidden cultivators. The agricultural tax, therefore, fell primarily on Thái *muang*-based, wet-rice farming communities. Recall that year fiscal year 1952 was the first iteration of the agricultural tax in portions of the Northwest Zone. In fiscal year 1953, the area of taxation spread to all free zones and some newly liberated zones. It was not until fiscal year 1954, however, that cadres realized the extent of the mess left over from the campaign.

Tax collection in year 1953, they discovered, had been subject to “many grave and serious errors” such as cadres “relying heavily on bureaucratism and commandism” to exact payment.<sup>106</sup> Core cadres, local cadres, and peasants all complained that year 1953 tax rates were too high, expressing widespread discontent with the campaign’s intensified claims on agrarian production. Meanwhile, Thái elites continued to dominate local government agencies and Farmers’ Councils charged with assessment and collection, enabling them to draw on a deep bag of tricks to evade taxes.<sup>107</sup> These findings stimulated another round of state learning.

Reporting on these problems in 1953-54, the Zone’s leadership declared in early 1955 that, along with development and disciplinary activities, the agricultural tax was one of three top inter-related priorities. Regional elites explained their logic as follows: only by increasing production could they boost tax revenue; increased revenue enabled them to “wipe out bandits”; eliminating political opposition protected taxation, expanded its area of implementation, and, in turn, enabled them to fight more

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*; Letter from Buy Quang Tao, Chủ tịch UBKCHC Khu Tây Bắc to UBKCHC các tỉnh trong Khu v/v thuế nông nghiệp, 23 Sept 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 4.

<sup>106</sup> Le Trung Dinh, “Báo cáo...” 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 12.

<sup>107</sup> Nguyen Huy Thanh, Giám đốc Khu Tài chính, “Báo cáo sơ kết đợt 1 công tác thuế nông nghiệp vụ đông ’54 ở hai tỉnh Sơn La và Lai Châu,” 13 Nov 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 1, 5-6.

“bandits,” and so on.<sup>108</sup> Even during a time of ostensible peace, therefore, development remained integral to a militarized political agenda just as taxation continued to be both cause and effect of political unrest.

During the campaign and for years to come, the practice of agricultural taxation, like *dân công* labor service, figured at the core of tense, uncertain, and rapidly changing relations of rule. Whatever the popular reaction, the claim-making processes of taxation and labor recruitment contributed towards making the very categories of rule and ruling, empowering a DRV “state” to claim resources located in a national “society.” Mobilization, as a militarized intensification of these same claim-making practices and processes, performed the same ideological work.

Even at the time, taxation did not unfold as planned but was subject to locally-specific, contingently changing historical conditions. Prior to the campaign, the Zone’s leadership had expected to implement the 1953 tax for the first time in three upgraded (i.e., from “newly liberated” to “free”) wet-rice districts of Lai Châu province. During the harvest, assessments took place as planned in Điện Biên, Quỳnh Nhai, and Tuần Giáo. Yet the French re-occupation of Điện Biên and the onset of battle in proximity forced a revision of subsequent collection measures. In Quỳnh Nhai and Tuần Giáo, tax collection proceeded in early 1954 but, given the campaign’s large and urgent demands, cadres “violated policy” by resorting to “commands” rather than educating consent among tax-payers. As a result of these “errors,” the province’s Administrative Committee later delegated a team to correct their colleague’s mistakes, to resolve the people’s “anxiety,” and to encourage them to “welcome” the year 1954 tax.<sup>109</sup>

As for Điện Biên district, the arrival of French paratroopers supposedly made tax collection impossible in the fertile Mường Thanh plain. So province leaders issued

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<sup>108</sup> Khu Tây Bắc, “Báo cáo...” 27 Apr 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 2.

<sup>109</sup> Lee San, “Báo cáo...” 31 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, Phòng UBHC Tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 102, p.1-2.



a new guideline: adopting a time-tested method from the Northwest Campaign, they instituted a system of “temporary borrowing” of local rice stocks by and for the military, to be amortized in the anticipated 1954 round of taxation.<sup>110</sup> Although this provincial document declared that there was no fiscal year 1953 tax at all in Điện Biên district, local sources show otherwise. District level reports reveal that residents of “free zones” in Điện Biên not only paid their taxes.<sup>111</sup> They also bore the burdens and fed the forces of a militarized state-making project.

*Điện Biên’s contested territory*

The arrival of French soldiers in November 1953 split the district of Điện Biên. The DRV’s spatial matrix apportioned the district’s territory either to a temporarily occupied plain or to free zones in the surrounding hills.

Điện Biên’s (re)occupied territory covered five communes inhabited by Black Thái residents. All of the communes fell, uncomfortably, within French firebases on the Mường Thanh plain.<sup>112</sup> Peasants in Cỏ Mỹ and Hồng Cúm villages, for example, either fled as refugees or stayed in an altered home.<sup>113</sup> Those who fled were expected to serve the People’s Army by ferrying supplies to soldiers in the trenches. Having abandoned their homes and lost their rice crop, food stores, and productive land, these refugees dug tubers in the forest for sustenance and lived in constant fear of starvation. Any who remained, however, were forced by the French military to live in “concentrated settlements” where soldiers appropriated their rice, shot and ate their

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid...*

<sup>111</sup> Ban Cán Sự Huyện Điện Biên, “Báo cáo tổng kết huy động nhân vật lực phục vụ chiến trường,” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 6.

<sup>112</sup> The French Expeditionary Forces occupied 5 communes: Thanh Yên, Thanh Tieng, Thanh Luông, Sam Mứn, and Nong Het. Tỉnh Lai Châu, “Kế hoạch công tác huyện Điện Biên,” 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 10, p. 1.

<sup>113</sup> Cỏ Mỹ (aka, Cò Mị) was site of Đèo Văn Ún’s execution in June 1954, discussed earlier.

livestock, and dismantled the timber from their homes to make fortifications.<sup>114</sup>

Though French-controlled territory was small in size, residents there were subject to intensified depredation, violence, and sexual assault.<sup>115</sup>

Only a few kilometers apart but a world away from the combat below, the hills surrounding the Mường Thanh plain remained subject to sustained DRV power and intensifying claim-making on its behalf. If Điện Biên illustrates the processes of mobilization broadly, then its territory's strategic position and its population's vulnerability combined to endow the work of institutionalizing and legitimating power with heightened significance, surveillance, and violence.

Like the Northwest's other "free zones," Điện Biên's local DRV institutions remained intact and continued to evolve mutually with practices and processes of mobilization. "Through the processes of serving the front," stated a report from Lai Châu province with respect to Điện Biên district's free zones, "the infrastructure of local government has been authenticated and consolidated; the armed forces of guerilla militia and police have also been selected."<sup>116</sup> Mobilizing resources for warfare, in other words, served to accelerate processes of institutional development: to select for and against personnel conducting everyday government work and enforcing state power. These old and new officials integrated collection of food and labor

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<sup>114</sup> Tỉnh Lai Châu, "Kế hoạch..." 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 10, p. 1; BCSHĐB, "Báo cáo tháng 2 năm 1954," 28 Feb 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 1-3.

<sup>115</sup> Sexual relations between local women and French soldiers—not all of which was coercive—is also evident in cases of syphilis the soldiers left behind. Cf., Ty Công an Lai Châu, "Báo cáo công tác năm 1954 của ty CA LC," 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 6. One report listed the "specific" damages suffered by Điện Biên's residents of as follows: "328 dead, 283 wounded, 157 women raped, 1255 houses destroyed, 671 water buffalo [dead]..." Lò Văn Hặc, "Báo cáo..." 5 March 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 1. It is unclear whether these figures apply to the district's occupied zones, free zones, or both. Also unclear is whether these figures include residents killed when a bomb detonated in the village of Noong Nhai on 25 Apr 1954, killing 444, "almost all of whom were women and children," discussed earlier and below. Cited from a memorial, photographed by the author January 2007; cf., Công an tỉnh Lai Châu, *Lịch sử công an huyện Điện Biên (1952-1975)* (Hanoi: NXB Công an Nhân dân, 1994), 30-31. Like figures for laborers and provisions, that casualty statistics are incompatible (i.e., the total is less than a constituent part) reflects the political processes of recounting subsequent to initial counting and accounting.

<sup>116</sup> Tỉnh Lai Châu, "Kế hoạch..." 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 10, p. 2.

resources into ongoing programs such as increasing production (opening swiddens, planting corn and vegetables) and implementing agricultural taxation. Coercive suppression of local political opponents also secured claims on resources: guerilla commandos “watched over” the resident population and prevented them, and their livestock, from departing the DRV’s claimed sovereign territory for Laos.<sup>117</sup>

For many of Điện Biên’s total 22,600 residents, the atmosphere was terrifying. French planes dropped bombs and napalm, killed residents and *dân công*, and lit entire villages afire.<sup>118</sup> For the first eight months of 1954, State Shops throughout Lai Châu province largely ceased to operate and the People’s Army assumed its functions: what scarce supplies of salt, farmtools, and tobacco were available were contingent on a preoccupied military and its distribution network.<sup>119</sup> Water buffalo were either butchered for meat or killed by aerial bombs and landmines, leaving farmers short of draft labor to plow their fields. Refugees from the plain’s French-occupied villages wandered about, begging for food: some of them, official commune leaders among others, lost faith in the DRV and fled for the relative safety of Laos. Beset with anxiety (*thắc mắc*) and worry (*lo*), “compatriots all over” feared starvation, particularly if the People’s Army delayed its attack any longer or did not fulfill its promised “certain victory.”<sup>120</sup> In late spring 1954, during some of the bloodiest fighting and after a bomb detonated in Noong Nhai village killing hundreds of Black Thái residents, a rumor spread that the Americans would soon drop an atom bomb.<sup>121</sup> Real and imagined death was present everywhere, threatening social life with the possibility of its existensial absence.

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<sup>117</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo tháng...” 28 Feb 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 2-4.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1; TCALC, “Báo cáo...” 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 5.

<sup>119</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 16.

<sup>120</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo tháng...” 28 Feb 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 1-2; Tỉnh Lai Châu, “Kế hoạch...” 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 10, p. 2.

<sup>121</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 6; Công an tỉnh Lai Châu (1994), 30-31.

DRV military and civilian officials responded to these worrisome conditions—and the very real threat towards their own political project—by intensifying institutional development and legitimation work. Institutionally, the Military’s Central Party Committee ordered cadres to strengthen commune leadership by recruiting local, loyal subjects through the practice and process of social mobilization. They underlined the commune’s role as mediator between the target-setting district and the plan-fulfilling villages. To meet these orders, the District Party Leadership Council (*Ban Cán sự huyện*) formed special Village Head and Stalwart Committees in each commune.<sup>122</sup> Chosen “stalwarts” (*trung kiên*) were “good people” from families with proper class backgrounds and, presumably, counter-balanced the suspect traditional authority of elite village leaders. Because cadres knew little of local languages and customs, stalwarts took the lead in village-based public meetings intended to stress the importance of military supply and fighting together against a singularized enemy.<sup>123</sup>

Stalwarts, cadres, and village heads used these meetings to conduct public assessments and to assign each family a level of provisioning and laboring duties. These mobilization practices served three institutional purposes: to gather resources, collect data, and select state personnel. Families yielded rice, corn, vegetables, and livestock as payment of the 1953 agricultural tax, sold them outright, or loaned grains against the projected fiscal 1954 tax. *Dân công* laborers, once separated from farm and household, worked either to ferry rice to trenches or mill un-husked rice brought in from afar.<sup>124</sup> Second, public assessments provided the district with household-level data on production capacity and manpower availability, furnishing state agents with knowledge to plan and conduct subsequent rounds of agricultural taxation and labor recruitment. Data collected were detailed, including: households categorized by class

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<sup>122</sup> Or, Ủy ban xã Trường bản Trung kiên.

<sup>123</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 1, 3.

<sup>124</sup> Tỉnh Lai Châu, “Kế hoạch...” 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 10, p. 4-5.

and villages by ethnicity; livelihood practices, agricultural production, and resource capacity; as well as impacts of and prospects for ongoing resources claims. Third, cadres selected for or against stalwarts based on their performance. “Through the process of mobilization work,” reads a District Party Leadership Council report, “cadres always closely foster and assist their sibling stalwarts regarding work habits and how each bears responsibilities.” Of the district’s 49 total stalwarts monitored in this way, 39 “vigilant” ones were provided with additional training in respective communes; and 10 “insufficient” ones were dismissed.<sup>125</sup> In sum, these three practices show how mobilization and state formation worked reciprocally: collecting resources enabled a military to enforce a state claim to territory; knowledge of an agrarian society enabled state agents to levy future claims; recruiting personnel from local populations embedded state in society, and vice versa.

The myriad meetings organized by the Village Head and Stalwart Committees also served as a forum for intensified legitimation work. Cadres educated the audience in the content of President Hồ Chí Minh’s “Letter to the Compatriots and Cadres of Lai Châu.”<sup>126</sup> His letter stressed loyalty to DRV Government and homeland (*tổ quốc*); unity (*đoàn kết*) and mutual assistance; helpfulness towards the military; and a policy of leniency (*khoan hồng*) for anyone who followed “the wrong path” earlier and wished now “to return to the Government and homeland.”<sup>127</sup> Note how homeland and Government figure together, as though a singular homey place: this is vernacular for nation, territory, and state configured together.

Like the Provincial Committee’s Appeal to the people of Lai Châu posted only ten days later, President Hồ’s letter opened with a nationalist interpretation of the

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<sup>125</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 3-4.

<sup>126</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo tháng...” 28 Feb 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 2; Tỉnh Lai Châu, “Kế hoạch...” 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 10, p. 1.

<sup>127</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Thư gửi đồng bào và cán bộ Lai Châu,” 12 Dec 1953, *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập* vol 7 (1996), 190.

region's history.<sup>128</sup> "For over 80 years now," he wrote, "the compatriots of Lai Châu have been exploited, oppressed, and tricked by French colonialists and reactionary Vietnamese traitors..." Once again, this is history in service to a presentist, dialectically-conceived political project. To accept this vision of the past was to acknowledge the illegitimacy of colonial rule and to embrace the legitimacy of the DRV alternative. If the Government and military promised to "liberate" the compatriots by relegating "exploitation" to the past, then these institutions requested resources, labor, and loyalty—now and in the future.

Cadres presented this temporally-inflected, dialectical differentiation between regimes to gather resources for the People's Army. In fact, differentiating dialectically between the two army's provisioning strategies was in and of itself an ideological tactic. Cadres drew on examples of provisioning practices in occupied territory where the "enemy" had, by late February 1954, "surrounded villages and took pigs, chicken, water buffalo... but did not offer money in return." By contrast, they argued, "From before until now, the Government did not allow the People's Army to take anything from the people," pointing to a practice "truly appropriate with people's ideas and a point of honor." The district's leadership committee provided a lesson plan for cadres, encouraging residents to think of the People's Army as akin to a water buffalo of one's own: "it protects the country, protects the house, so one must care for it so that it has energy to strike the enemy." Although this representation struck a chord with peasants accustomed to working with livestock, note the legitimation work it contains: equating a complex, coercive institution with a singular domesticated animal elides the (in)humanity of organized violence. "That we in the rear are able to eat well and sleep peacefully," continues the lesson, "we must thank the sibling soldiers out on the

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<sup>128</sup> Discussed in Chapter 4. Lò Văn Hặc, Chủ tịch UBHC tỉnh Lai Châu, "Hiệu triệu của Ủy ban kháng chiến Hành chính tỉnh Lai Châu," 22 Dec 1953, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1258.

front.”<sup>129</sup> Just as a farmer is grateful to a water buffalo, so too must “we”—i.e., a national we in the making—be grateful to the army. Whether or not the local people who supplied the military actually did “eat well” is another question, discussed below.

Public meetings also provided opportunity for the audience to air grievances (*tổ khổ*) and for cadres and stalwarts to monitor public morale. Cadres recorded and classified these popular sentiments as either “good” (*tốt*) or “bad” (*xấu*) “reactions” (*phản ứng*) and then devised measures to reward or punish them, respectively.

On the “good” side, peasants supported the DRV and its policies and welcomed the chance to serve it. “Selling pigs and chickens and paying the agricultural tax enables the army to eat and gain energy to fight the enemy and protect the order of our *bản muang*,” stated one Hmong resident, who summarized that, “caring for the military is like caring for a sibling who leans on me.” Another expressed support by likening the military to a guest for whom the local resident played host: “This year while the bandits are in Điện Biên,” stated a resident of Hang Sông village, “we all celebrated Tết by going on *dân công* to deliver rice to the army to eat.”<sup>130</sup> The personification of the military and incorporation of its members as akin to family are all social effects of legitimation work.

Still others accepted a form of personal authority in the DRV’s President and praised the work of liberation. One recognized charisma in Hồ Chí Minh and responded to his authority: “Although far away, Great grandfather Hồ still always loves the people. He even writes a letter greeting and encouraging the region’s people to work peacefully.” Indeed, the president’s charismatic authority worked together with the idea of liberation in a powerful way, stimulating emotive, moving

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<sup>129</sup> BCSHĐB, “Báo cáo tháng...” 28 Feb 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 1, 4.

<sup>130</sup> BCSHĐB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 2.

responses.<sup>131</sup> “Before we were as though deaf and mute,” stated one poor peasant, “now, enabled by the Government, Great grandfather Hồ sends cadres back here to announce all kinds of differences, as though my deaf ears and blind eyes can be clear again.”<sup>132</sup> Hồ Chí Minh’s charisma contributed to a personification of complex institutions, themselves produced and reproduced through melded traditional and bureaucratic authority. The President’s letter writing to local residents, soldiers, and cadres continued throughout the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign and beyond.<sup>133</sup> He worked to present a caring, determined, human face at the helm of a complex, unsteady, and violent state-making project.

Of course, exchanging heartfelt sentiments between prospective leaders and followers featured as only the opening steps in a longer social process. Next, cadres expected these real and potential subjects to follow through with their assessments. Should someone fulfill *and* exceed his or her assessed duties, the district committee celebrated such “outstanding individuals” in elaborate ceremonies, awarded them medals, and bestowed each with prizes of one kg salt and a shovel.<sup>134</sup> The public ceremonies performed a tremendous amount of legitimation work, such as: representing officials from diverse bureaucratic constituencies to appear as “Government”; establishing, and making visible, hierarchical relations between territorialized administrative units; individualizing performance of collectively assigned duties and collectivizing duties performed individually; and celebrating an evolving relationship between loyal subjects and newly recognized rulers. These were

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<sup>131</sup> Max Weber writes that charisma applies to “an individual personality” who is “considered extraordinary” and “regarded as exemplary.” Statements cited above indicate a social recognition of these qualities in President Hồ Chí Minh. As Weber notes, social recognition of these “extra-ordinary qualities” and the consequent willingness to act accordingly that grants charisma its authority. *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 241-245.

<sup>132</sup> BCSHDB, “Bảo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 2.

<sup>133</sup> Cf., Hồ Chí Minh, “Hồ Chủ Tịch gửi thư cho các cán bộ và chiến sỹ mặt trận Điện Biên Phủ,” 12 Dec 1953, *Quân đội Nhân dân*, Điện Biên Province Library, clippings file no. 266; Hồ Chí Minh, *Hồ Chí Minh toàn tập* vol 7, yrs 1953-55 (1996), 255-257, 265, 272, 292, 303.

<sup>134</sup> BCSHDB, “Bảo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 7.



heady displays of power that figured in a longer making of “the state” as a unified body representing, watching over, and caring for “society.”

Lò Văn Ếng from Nà Tấu commune, for example, responded as intended. He had been poor during French rule, leaving his wife and child with not enough to eat. He and his family had “requested” (*nhờ*) President Hồ and the Government to send the military up and “liberate” Điện Biên. Then, he had “vigilantly” increased his production such that he and his family did have enough to eat—and then some. During the campaign, not only did Lò Văn Ếng pay his tax of 330 kg rice: he also “loaned” the military another 450 kg; “helped” other villagers with another 450 kg rice; sold the military two water buffalo (wounded by airplane fire), 40 kg pork, and a half ton of green vegetables; performed two rounds of *dân công* labor, including acting as guide for soldiers building a “secret” road (presumably for artillery); and led his commune in another movement to increase production. Though the degree of Lò Văn Ếng’s support may have been exceptional—for which he earned the Northwest Zone’s highest commendation—he was one of many district residents to be awarded honors for exemplary service.<sup>135</sup> Taken together, their actions illustrate the two-sided nature of mobilization. Coercion and consent could work together, but they could also work apart. Lò Văn Ếng was among those who welcomed liberation, benefited from DRV programs, and consented to claims made in its name.

Among the “free zones” of Điện Biên, Lò Văn Ếng was resident of one of two communes that enjoyed a privileged relationship to the military. Located in proximity to the Front Command, Mường Phăng and Nà Tấu were the only communes where populations engaged in market-based exchange accounted for in official reporting.<sup>136</sup> Of course, many other farmers sold produce, particularly vegetables, to soldiers and

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<sup>135</sup> BCSHĐB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 6-8.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* p. 1.

officers even if their activities went uncounted. But the act of accounting for these transactions indicates privileged access to state resources unavailable to regular soldiers. Situated at a safe distance from ground-based combat, General Giáp, his staff, and PRC advisors operated from a bunker in Mường Phăng where they enjoyed access to fresh supplies. The officer corps purchased chickens, water buffalos (two of which had belonged to Lò Văn Ếng), and swine.<sup>137</sup> Such meat was in very short supply: water buffalo, in particular, were targets for French airplanes as well as desperately scarce sources of draft labor.<sup>138</sup> Evidently, these officers drew on their institutional authority and their access to currency (*đồng*) to obtain exceptional provisions with exceptional exchange power.

Not everyone consented to mobilization, indicating that DRV legitimacy was never fully accomplished but, rather, was always partial, negotiated, and sometimes contested. Among recorded “bad” reactions to mobilization, people of suspect class backgrounds rejected legitimation work, expressed displeasure with their assessed duties, questioned whom their duties benefited, and complained about bearing the costs. “Why all these meetings?” asked an old Thái lord, “just take the rice and meat already.”<sup>139</sup> His response is fascinating because this lord (*phìa tạo*) recognized legitimation work as such, expressed impatience with its performance, declined to participate, and accepted the material loss. His response indicates a begrudging acceptance of material claims and a willful refusal of any accompanying explanations. That he gave up his rice and meat but cadres nonetheless recorded his response as “bad” indicates the deep significance of legitimation work embedded in mobilization. Claim making was about appropriating material goods *and*—just as significantly—constructing new relations of rule and encouraging their recognition as legitimate.

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<sup>137</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo kế hoạch đợt hai,” 28 Feb 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194.

<sup>138</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo tháng...” 28 Feb 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 1, 3.

<sup>139</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 2.

Another lord expressed anxiety over how female participation in *dân công* labor service challenged patriarchal gender norms. “Requiring women to go work brazenly,” he stated, “spoils and embitters them; later, how will they become wives?”<sup>140</sup> As discussed above, labor service during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign pulled more and more women off-farm to work on the road, milling rice, or delivering rice to soldiers. In fact, that Thái women in Lai Châu caught Hoàng Công Phảm’s fancy indicates the potential for romance between soldiers and local women. Perhaps it was such real or imagined rivalry to local male claims on women that contributed to the lord’s reaction. In any event, off-farm laboring must have been a transformative, if not ambivalent, experience for women and men alike. Labor service exposed villagers to a broader realm of people and ideas that, on their return, led them to question customs—such as, but not limited to, patriarchy—in their home communities.

One refused to participate in labor service and questioned the Ethnic Policy’s logic. An “upper class” resident opined that “Kinh people,” faced with French military superiority elsewhere, opted to take advantage of favorable conditions in his backyard. “The Kinh come up here and just eat the rice of Thái people,” he stated, “so no way am I going to do *dân công* work at all.” Not everyone shared the Ethnic Policy’s prescribed unity between peoples conceived as Vietnamese. Nor did they all respond to claim-making as intended. In fact, this one man recognized myriad soldiers, officers, and cadres not as fellow Vietnamese but as un-welcome Kinh visitors. Their presence was an imposition and he refused to play host.

Just as claim-making’s reach broadened to include highland groups and its scope intensified among all those affected, so too did social recognition of its multiple unintended consequences expand and increase. One “kulak” (*phú nông*) observed, “The military eats up all our rice and then leaves us; how can I save anything?”

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

Indeed, state claims on scarce food resources depleted household stores. Labor service added another burden. One Hmong “compatriot” stated, “This year requires going on *dân công* a lot such that many people fall ill.”<sup>141</sup> This supposedly “bad reaction” nonetheless echoes Nguyễn Kháng’s observation (above). Not only did *dân công* labor service affect the health and well-being of Hmong participants. As with earlier military campaigns more broadly, state and military claims on agrarian labor and produce risked the ability of local communities to reproduce socially. In addition, that the Hmong person’s grievance resulted in a recorded “bad reaction” also confirms what Nguyễn Kháng called labor recruitment’s “not good political influence,” i.e. detrimental to the legitimization project. Unintended consequences such as these threatened to unravel carefully constructed representations of state as caring for the people and cadres as solicitous of their needs.

In these latter cases, when people of suspect class background aired their grievances and pointed to the failure of legitimization work, the stalwarts assumed another role. They “watched over” (*theo dõi*) disgruntled rural elites to regulate compliance with their assessed duties. At first, stalwarts staged un-announced visits on their homes. When this system of monitoring worsened relations “between the two rural classes” (i.e., between upper and lower class) and caused stalwarts to become hesitant and appear “pained,” the District Party Leadership Council opted for other measures. The Council assigned a cadre to accompany stalwarts on their rounds and, in order to avoid suspicion, the cadre demonstrated to the stalwart how to “observe discreetly” the activities of the “upper class.”<sup>142</sup> Just as good reactions and fulfillment of assessed duties merited reward and state recognition, so too did bad reactions and

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<sup>141</sup> BCSHĐB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 2.

<sup>142</sup> BCSHĐB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 3-4.

failure to meet assessed duties deserve punishment.<sup>143</sup> In either case, cadres relied on local recruits to enact village-based scrutiny and to police individualized conduct.

Although these forms of monitoring and surveillance were likely punishment enough, it is significant that officials accused of crimes were not dismissed. The chair of Độc Lập commune, two committee representatives of Mường Luân commune, and three village heads were all accused of “failing to meet targets and acting insufficiently as emulatory models.” In other words, their first crime was not to gather from respective populations resources demanded by the district. Their second crime is harder to interpret (perhaps they protested mobilization? Acted corruptly?) yet nonetheless demonstrates the significance of emulatory learning and modeling. Regardless of their exact crimes, however, they retained their jobs ostensibly because “time was too short to mobilize the people.”<sup>144</sup> Although urgency was certainly a factor, I would offer an alternative explanation for their retention. The DRV’s local state structure in Điện Biên had been, and was still being, cobbled together from pre-existing, localized relations of rule predicated on the enduring *bản muang* model. Kinh cadres and district officials could ill afford to alienate persons who merged locally-recognized forms of authority, be it traditional or charismatic, with the bureaucratic authority vested in commune and village leadership. Although the district hired and fired “lower class” stalwarts at will, they were reluctant to dismiss recognized local authorities from the “upper class.” As such, DRV hiring practices contributed to the reproduction, and reinvestment with power, of the very same class distinctions the DRV’s revolutionary agenda intended to overturn.

In addition to illustrating the partial outcomes of legitimation work and the local basis of DRV power, disgruntlement with state claims also foreshadowed larger,

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<sup>143</sup> Quang Van Dai, “Công tác...” 3 May 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 1401, 11-16.

<sup>144</sup> BCSHDB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3 phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 8.

unintended consequences of expanding and intensifying social mobilization. The alleged kulak and the Hmong compatriot made astute observations that resonated with widespread fears of starvation. The military's claims were taking a toll, depleting household foodstocks in an area where seasonal hunger was, and would remain, a hazard of an agrarian livelihood.

In late March 1954, the Điện Biên District conducted a sample survey in two communes to assess conditions of food security. Vinh Quang was identified as a “typical” Hmong commune located in hills east of the plain. The commune had six villages with 977 total residents and 148 families. Presumably, their livelihood was based on swidden agriculture and pastoralism. The district registered the following data regarding what the commune's residents yielded during mobilization: 23 tons rice (157 kg per household), two tons meat, and two and a half tons vegetables. Of the resident total, 229 residents performed 2,952 days of *dân công* labor. After this mobilization, 23 families in Vinh Quang were left only with seedstock (i.e., the bare minimum); 37 families had one month's supply of rice and two months' corn; 62 families had two months' rice and three months' corn; and 17 families had four months' rice and “enough corn to eat.” Although these data may be incomplete, it is clear that mobilization had significantly depleted food stores.<sup>145</sup> Just over half the commune's families had enough grains to last beyond five months. The rest would soon be hungry.

Mường Luân commune was identified as “3 part” wet-rice farmers and “1 part” swidden farmers. In other words, 75% of the commune's presumably Black Thái population farmed wet rice and 25% grew, or supplemented their livelihoods with, dry-rice cultivation. Unlike the Hmong Vinh Quang commune, there was no registered

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<sup>145</sup> For example: counting mismatches [i.e., number of listed families (23 + 62 + 37 + 17 = 139) is less than the total given (148)]; unclear basis for daily rations; under-specified family composition. BCSHDB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 1, 5.

corn. Mường Luân contained 19 villages inhabited by 2,128 total residents distributed among 314 families. The district registered the following resources yielded during mobilization: 102 tons rice (325 kg per household), three tons meat, five tons vegetables. Of the resident total, 776 residents performed 10,253 days of labor. After “implementing the plan” in Mường Luân, 71 families had “nothing left to eat, only seedstock”; 74 families had “only enough to eat for one month”; 105 families for two months; 50 families for three months; eight families for four months; and six families for six months. Again, though these data may be incomplete, they show that mobilization had depleted foodstocks—and to a degree more severe than their Hmong neighbors.<sup>146</sup> After mobilization, more than two-thirds the Black Thái commune’s families had not enough food stored to last beyond the next two months. Perhaps it was speaking out about these worrisome conditions that led Mường Luân’s two commune representatives to get in trouble with district officials.

Just as mobilization yielded new forms of data, so too did this data reveal the consequences of mobilization. The official who recorded these statistics made an ominous, if understated, observation: “if the rains don’t come, [they] will be hungry.” Yet not one family in either commune had enough rice left to last until November when, if the rains came, the next rice harvest would be ready. Therefore, many of them would be hungry long before. Although the Hmong residents in Vinh Quang had corn to supplement a rice-based diet, the Black Thái in Mường Luân had only rice and, evidently, no corn. Although partial at best, note that the counts and accounts analyzed above date to 29 March 1954.<sup>147</sup> As such, there were five more weeks before the

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.* In addition to above concerns, what is meant by “enough to eat” is unclear. Presumably, it means stored rice but not, for example, forest foods available in the event of severe shortage.

<sup>147</sup> Total figures for commune-level agricultural produce and labor recruitment certainly do not include everything and everyone mobilized during the campaign: the district recorded additional quantities of produce “distributed to the military” (101 water buffalo, 567 pigs, 1,173 chickens and ducks, 4,460 oranges, etc.) with unclear origins but most likely from these same communes. Nor do these figures

cessation of hostilities, during which time local residents most likely gave even more than these “summary” data indicate. Indeed, hunger as well as real or feared starvation loomed over most everyone for whom Điện Biên was home.

*Lai Châu: liberated or occupied?*

The French reoccupation of Điện Biên Phủ in November 1953 and the People’s Army’s occupation of Lai Châu town in December meant that, according to the DRV’s spatialized matrix, their statuses switched. Điện Biên was no longer “newly liberated” but “temporarily occupied.” Meanwhile, in line with the Appeal signed by Lò Văn Hặc and posted on 22 December, Lai Châu was not occupied—in spite of thousands of People’s Army’s troops there—but, ostensibly, “newly liberated.” In other words, Lai Châu was no longer a military front but a rear area where the People’s Army counted on gleaning provisions and labor from its local population. Lai Châu, therefore, was an internalizing nation-state frontier about to be made and remade through urgent and rapid mobilization.

The Thái Federation’s collapse signaled a profound and lasting shift in spatial regulation and claim-making on its relocated population. Lai Châu’s town center was no longer proud capital of a semi-autonomous unit of French empire, its leaders able to draw on political relations all the way to Paris. Rather, DRV territorial administration humbled the town by recognizing it as capital (*thị xã*) only of Mường Lay district.<sup>148</sup> Like most of southern Lai Châu province, the town by the same name was considered a newly liberated zone, transforming all these reconfigured spatial units into sites where mobilization began tentatively, then quickened. This was where

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include anything or anyone mobilized before or after the campaign. BCSHĐB, “Báo cáo...” 29 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2194, p. 5.

<sup>148</sup> Lam Sung, Ủy ban Hành chính Huyện Mường Lay, “Báo cáo tổng kết công tác trong 1954,” 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 1.



Hoàng Công Phẩm commanded laborers and collected ambivalent memories. To the north, in districts of Mường Tè and Sinh Hồ, armed opposition still troubled the military and prevented their population's immediate mobilization. In short, the People's Army had secured a DRV claim to most of the Federation's territory, enabling cadres and military officers to subject many of its residents to claims on their labor and foodstocks.

Following the People's Army's advances, the mutually constitutive processes of state formation and social mobilization began in a flurry. Unlike elsewhere in the DRV's Northwest Zone, armed propaganda units never preceded large-scale military occupation of Lai Châu town, meaning that its residents had little contact with revolutionary organizers. Even the category of "newly liberated zone," therefore, concealed a difference relative to other Black River areas that had earlier shared this same status. Perhaps not surprisingly, the recently constituted Mường Lay District Administrative Committee found its work among the district's 20,079 inhabitants to be "heavy." When soldiers and cadres first arrived, the people abandoned their homes, ran off to the forest, and hid out in their swidden huts. Having been "fooled" by the French and Đèo Văn Long, reported DRV officials, many residents feared the "Việt Minh" would burn their homes and "eat human flesh." They worried that "Kinh" people hated "White Thái" people so much that they would be shot on sight.<sup>149</sup>

Before cadres and soldiers could enlist the population's support for the military campaign, they "called on the people to return to normal lives" (*chiêu an*). Because commune committees did not yet exist, the Ministry of Defense's General Department of Politics (*Tổng cục Chính trị*) assisted the district to construct DRV authority. Until the General Department's departure in August 1954, in other words, Lai Châu town was subject to an outright form of militarized rule. Assisted by military political

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<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

cadres, the district's first step was to organize occasions for the "confused and suspicious" people of Mường Lay to "study Government policy," by which they meant a DRV monopoly claim on social regulation. They held meetings in each of the district's 113 villages and at 15 "large" events, with a total attendance of 88,654 people.<sup>150</sup> Though these figures were reported as self-evident success of "propagandizing the people," the scale and intensity of a rising state's self-presentation should not be underestimated. On average, each and every district resident attended 4 study sessions, and some even more. Whatever form their new lives took, it was far from what they had known as normal.

If anything, subsequent everyday activities demonstrated that the lives of Mường Lay's residents would not return to ordinary but, rather, had already changed extraordinarily. Given its strategic position, drawing on Mường Lay's population to serve as *dân công* labor was urgent and crucial if not fraught with difficulty. As Hoàng Công Phảm's memoirs explained, Lai Châu was located on a crucial node of the "Glorious Line" over which flowed supplies from China to Điện Biên Phủ's frontlines. Completing this overland and riverine route included opening a new road, 90 km long, requiring arduous work that drew directly on the labors of Mường Lay's residents.<sup>151</sup>

Military supply officers, including Hoàng Công Phảm, and district cadres did mobilize a substantial portion of Mường Lay's population to work as *dân công*. During the campaign alone, through three waves of mobilization, the district reported that a total of 4,003 residents worked on land (roughly three-quarters) or on water (one-quarter). Those on land either worked as pedestrian porters, tended trains of pack horses (using their own 531 animals), or built and opened roads like the one connecting the Glorious Line. Those on water worked as sailors plying the Black

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<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7, 9.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2; Lò Văn Hặc, "Báo cáo..." 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 8.

River with rafts. This figure means that, on average, 1/5<sup>th</sup> the district's population served the campaign as *dân công* labor. Given a district total of 2,862 households, each supplied, on average, 1.4 persons to the front.<sup>152</sup> A subsequent report by Lò Văn Hặc, representing Lai Châu province, confirmed the campaign's total of roughly 4,000 *dân công* laborers, adding that each of them worked from one to three months.<sup>153</sup>

The urgency of enlisting support for ongoing combat led officials, at least initially, to bypass standard legitimation procedures. Kinh cadres skipped recruiting local stalwarts to act as intermediaries and interpreters. Furthermore, these downstream officials “did not attend to the good or bad reactions of the people.” Meetings to air popular grievances, in other words, did not take place, foreclosing this form of negotiation. Cadres implemented the *dân công* policy without explaining its content, i.e. to persuade citizens of their responsibilities and the program's ostensible benefits. Instead, they stressed “the obligation of participating in resistance and state-building.”<sup>154</sup> In short, it appears as though cadres were speaking *to* these audiences and not *with* them. If mobilization was always a mixture of consent and coercion, then in Mường Lay, at least initially, the balance tilted towards the latter.

As a result, by the time these residents left as *dân công*, DRV labor recruitment reproduced old legitimation problems in a new locale. Few people understood the fine distinction between the new regime's labor policy and the corvée practices (*bắt phu*) of its predecessor. In fact, it is likely that this uncertainty over differently-legitimated claims worked to the advantage of officers and cadres: however unpopular *dân công* service was for its participants, they were nonetheless accustomed to claims on their labor power. Indeed, cadres themselves frequently violated standing *dân công* policy and practice: not only did they neglect to explain the policy, but in practice labor

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<sup>152</sup> Lam Sung, “Báo cáo...” 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 2-3.

<sup>153</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 March 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 11.

<sup>154</sup> Lam Sung, “Báo cáo...” 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 3, 9.

recruitment was “unequal” (i.e., some served longer than others), left fields short of farmhands, and included individuals too young or too old to participate.<sup>155</sup>

Performing *dân công* labor was certainly unpopular among Mường Lay’s residents. “Going on *dân công* this much,” protested one Thái village head from Bản Ho Luong, “will destroy livelihoods.” Although officials dismissed his protest by associating him with the “old puppet regime,” the village head’s concerns about labor service’s opportunity costs were valid. More generally, and as usual, residents called up to labor expressed broad “anxiety” (*thắc mắc*), particularly about the families they left behind. “When the *dân công* hit the road” they “did not have a spirit of mobilization nor were their anxieties resolved.”<sup>156</sup>

By acknowledging these “mistakes,” officials opined that “study sessions” and the increased use of stalwarts, i.e. procedures used in Điện Biên District, might have alleviated popular concerns with *dân công* recruitment.<sup>157</sup> In response, I would argue that many such “mistakes” resulted from structural inequalities embedded in the power-laden encounter between upstream men and women with male downstream cadres, socially recognized as White Thái and Hmong or Kinh, respectively. Negotiating mobilization unfolded on profoundly unequal terms and, not surprisingly, issues of ethnicity and gender once again became points of difference and dispute.

As elsewhere, many Hmong residents were reluctant to descend from the heights to labor in the heat of the valleys in dangerous conditions. To avoid service and “fearing death,” six Hmong families from Tu Chua escaped across “enemy lines” to Sìn Hồ; others fled roadcrews dispatched to work on the Glorious Line; an underspecified “number” even died. Indeed, death from labor service was not only a fear but an ever-present possibility. Many Hmong people fell ill, suffered from

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3-4.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

exhaustion, and died from exposure to communicable diseases like mumps. “Counting only the month of September,” reads a report from December 1954, “the number of sick people reached more than 90 and one portion died.”<sup>158</sup> Although nurses did cure some cases, that the other eleven months of 1954 went uncounted indicates that the number of total Hmong people dead from labor service must have been far higher.

As elsewhere, cadres actively targeted women for service, in line with egalitarian ideals and a pragmatic interest in increasing the eligible labor pool. Perhaps because local men had been drafted to serve—and perish—in the Federation’s Thái battalions or were already serving as DRV civilian laborers, women composed an estimated 2/3<sup>rd</sup> the district population. The district committee’s chairman complained in December 1954, however, about his colleagues’ ongoing inability “to exploit women’s capacities,” expressing frustration that he and his fellow officials, “could not mobilize women.” The Hmong woman upset with *dân công* service whom Hoàng Công Phẩm encountered, therefore, must have come from outside Mường Lay district but elsewhere within the Northwest Zone. Even the district official’s own report indicates that the gender composition of off-farm labor was changing: the data record no women at all until November 1954 when 23 of 218 road workers are listed as women; then, in December, of 500 people mobilized to work on roadcrews, 300 are listed as women.<sup>159</sup>

Broader patterns of on-farm male and female labor were changing as well. District officials noted that Thái women did not customarily work in the fields, a task traditionally reserved for men. Pointing to this gendered division of farm labor, Mường Lay’s district chairman accused Thái people, and women in particular, of “eating more than they work.”<sup>160</sup> His concerns foreshadowed an emerging Northwest-

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<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p. 3, 10.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2, 4.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* p. 10.

wide, regional program to increase “women ethnic minority” participation in on-farm labor: because men were needed for *dân công* roadwork and transportation, women were expected to “volunteer” to plough and plant. This was not simply a program to free women from patriarchal norms. Rather, finance officials forecast that increasing female work on-farm enabled male labor off-farm while, at the same time, maintaining regional tax revenue.<sup>161</sup> Nor was the effort predicated entirely on voluntarism: a police report from December 1954 noted that women in Mường Lay, like elsewhere in Lai Châu, “were learning how to plow, mill rice, and hoist the burden of *dân công*.”<sup>162</sup> Rather, that the police reported on female work habits indicates an ongoing, militarized development agenda to regulate labor, increase production, and enhance tax receipts.<sup>163</sup> A new front had appeared in the midst of war: the home front.<sup>164</sup> For male, Kinh cadres like the district chairman, women’s rate of participation in agriculture and labor service was not only a problem. Solving it was a task that he and others like him empowered themselves to direct.

All of these issues encountered in, and unresolved through, formal legitimization work raise questions about Lai Châu’s role in the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign. How did mobilization work there at this time? Was it based solely on force coordinated by a centralized politico-military apparatus? Unlike sources for Điện Biên District, archival documents from Mường Lay District, including those drawn on thus far, date to December 1954, long after the cessation of hostilities at Điện Biên Phủ in May. This lack of contemporaneous documentation, I would argue, is analytically significant. For the newly ensconced officials of Mường Lay, this one military exercise merged and blurred with subsequent and ongoing campaigns. The Điện Biên Phủ Campaign may

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<sup>161</sup> Khu Tây Bắc, “Bảo cáo...” 27 Apr 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 9.

<sup>162</sup> TCALC, “Bảo cáo...” 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 5.

<sup>163</sup> Cf., Shelley Feldman, “Social regulation in a time of war,” *Globalizations* 4 (2007): 445-459.

<sup>164</sup> For a comparative perspective on the “front lawn as the front line” in 1950s US domestic life, cf., Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense begins at Home* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 70-72.

have been exceptional but it was not unique. Militarized claim-making began, but did not end, with a singularized military event.

Based on the evidence above, mobilization in Lai Châu town and Mường Lay District, relative to Điện Biên District and the Northwest Zone more generally, certainly appeared to lean more towards coercion and its threat. Notwithstanding militarized coercion, there is evidence to suggest that claim-making nonetheless contained reciprocal processes predicated on new forms of consensual exchange.

Even military domination, in other words, still involved legitimation. When the People's Army arrived in December 1953, years of warfare had left the local economy "exhausted" (*kiệt quệ*): people did not "have enough cloth to wear nor salt to eat"; their livestock and rice had all been "snatched up by the traitors and French." State Shops, supplied by the military, quickly moved in to fill the void by distributing cloth, salt, and farmtools.<sup>165</sup> Once again, cadres initiated a reciprocal exchange to delegitimize colonial and Federation rule as "exploitation" and to legitimate DRV rule as "liberation." They presented themselves and represented "state" as uniquely capable of improving people's lives and caring for their welfare.

The development project was backed with considerable force. Cadres and officers seized symbols and materials associated with the old regime, now considered "war spoils," and set about redistributing, occupying, or destroying them. Over the first half of 1954, the district confiscated and redistributed property belonging to Đào Văn Long and other senior Thái Federation officials. They seized over 17 tons of rice once held by members of the Đào clan and other compradors and stored the stocks in a new granary. Cadres then distributed some nine tons to peasants and, presumably, used the remaining eight tons to feed the legions of *dân công* laborers and soldiers.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Lam Sung, "Báo cáo..." 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 9.

<sup>166</sup> UBKCHC Mường Lay, no title, 3 Jun 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 96, p. 2.

Cadres and officers confiscated 307 irrigable *mẫu* of wet-rice land (over 110 hectares) formerly held by the Đèo clan and other elites; and then redistributed this choice land among 680 Thái and Hmong families, benefiting one quarter of the district's households.<sup>167</sup> Likewise, cadres seized and redistributed draft animals and goats formerly belonging to Đèo Văn Long. Ironically, kerosene confiscated from these now-departed elites became the midnight oil illuminating meetings held to decide on how to divvy up their forfeited property.<sup>168</sup>

Not all property reclamation and redistribution was so ordered, particularly in the early stages of the People's Army's occupation. In late 1953, People's Army soldiers and officers seized furniture from "several houses," presumably once belonging to Đèo Văn Long and his family, and used them without care for their upkeep. When they found out, Lai Châu's province committee and Party leadership reappropriated these belongings and moved what remained of them into a storehouse. They declared the houses, any associated furnishings, and the Federation's former office complex all to be "Government property." After these civilian and Party officials picked up and moved south to serve the front, however, their property (re)claim evidently no longer held. Between February and June, units of the military, engineers, transportation officials, and *dân công* laborers—all from "downstream"—used these homes and offices to "rest their feet" and, moreover, ransacked their contents. They broke apart furniture for firewood and smashed wall mirrors into hand-held ones, "to the degree that not one thing was left intact." Summarizing that 80% of the property was destroyed beyond use, the reporting civilian official expressed his

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<sup>167</sup> Lam Sung, "Báo cáo..." 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 1, 5.

<sup>168</sup> UBKCHC Mường Lay, "UBKCHC Mường Lay báo cáo về chiến lê phẩm thu được và phân phối như sau báo cáo đề tỉnh rõ," 10 Jul 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 96, p. 3.



anger, embarrassment, and disappointment through clenched teeth by inviting the Zone's "consideration" of his military counterparts.<sup>169</sup>

These divergent examples of how the new regime handled property inherited from the old demonstrate power in multiple forms. First, both redistributive and destructive acts were symbolic and material. Appropriating the property of Đèo clan or Federation offices demonstrated both the dispatch of a once powerful family and the rise of a more powerful alternative. Second, redistribution of land resources, foodstocks, and capital goods all demonstrated a rising center's power and intent to regulate property relations. Cadres working to institute new relations of rule forged alliances with, and built support among, poor peasants who had suffered from prior forms of inequality. These acts worked together to legitimate a revolutionary program and to delegitimize Đèo clan rule. If the desired result was to represent "Government" as mythically unified and willingly able to help "the people," then these ideas of state and society were intended effects of legitimation work.

The wanton destruction of Đèo clan property and Federation office, by contrast, illustrates the underlying tensions between and among institutions competing for scarce resources. The thinly-veiled anger expressed by the province official towards shenanigans perpetrated in his absence by army units, sappers, and laborers may just be a case of mice at play while the cat was away. Nonetheless, civilian and military institutions did not always enjoy harmonious relations but, like cat and mouse, had differential coercive capacities and could be mutually antagonistic. Even the Center's priorities changed over time, from emphasizing military confrontation to instituting civilian rule. Notwithstanding their lumpen self-representation as the

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<sup>169</sup> Lê San, UBKCHC Tỉnh Lai Châu, "Trích yếu: BK việc nhà cửa đồ đạc dụng cụ ở Khu Hành chính Thị xã bị phá hủy," 18 Jun 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542.

Government, bureaucratic segments within the rising DRV state could and, sometimes did, work at cross-purposes.

As the Appeal signed by Lò Văn Hặc made clear and the myriad meetings doubtlessly emphasized, the provision of goods and the redistribution of agrarian resources figured in an emerging symbolic and material relationship. Recall that the Appeal made on behalf of the Lai Châu Province Administrative Committee proposed a bargain: in exchange for “freeing” the residents, redistributing the property of “feudalists,” ridding French “brigands,” and providing scarce goods, the rising regime expected local resources in return to enable its ongoing military campaign. How did the appeal’s legitimation work materialize, or what were its material effects? How did Mường Lay’s district officials count mobilization? What do their accounting practices say about the claim-making process?

Available archival evidence indicates that in the early days of “liberation,” the district’s farmers “loaned” (*cho vay*) substantial quantities of rice and foodstuffs to the military. A district report from December 1954 lists loaned amounts of rice, corn, livestock (goats, water buffalo, cattle, pig, chicken), eggs, and vegetables all organized according to commune. These communes, however, were formed only after the initial round of mobilization, their leadership chosen during its processes. Notwithstanding this anachronism, the commune by commune data is summarized by district and includes quantities of rice (60 tons husked + 10 tons unhusked), vegetables (six tons), eggs (419), livestock (rendered into 26 tons fresh meat), etc.<sup>170</sup> The system of loaning, like elsewhere in the rapidly consolidating Northwest Zone, implied that these amounts counted as credit towards the soon-to-be implemented yet differentially applied fiscal year 1954 agricultural tax. Whereas Thái wet-rice farmers did pay taxes,

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<sup>170</sup> Lam Sung, “Báo cáo...” 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 4, 8.

collection problems among Hmong swidden farmers stimulated an internal review and, eventually, contributed towards granting them a temporary exemption.<sup>171</sup>

As elsewhere in the Northwest Zone, mobilization was linked to ongoing and subsequent forms of claim-making. Mobilization of provisions informed and foreshadowed sustained agricultural taxation. What is significant about the above figures is less the reported counts than the means of accounting for them spatially and temporally. Spatially, making communes—not to mention district, province, etc.—occurred during, and in support of, mobilization. Just as making territorial boundaries structured claim-making practice, Kinh cadres used the process of claim-making to select local leaders of emergent administrative units. Temporally, accounting for these quantities by date reveals that collection may have begun with the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign but did not end with it. Rather, for residents and rulers of a transformed Lai Châu, this campaign initiated practices and processes of mobilization exceeding any temporal boundaries.

If mobilization was in the process of normalization, then its practice also reproduced abnormal effects. In August 1954, for example, office workers and youth brigade laborers borrowed another 25 tons corn from Hmong farmers and purchased another 7 tons rice from Thái farmers. To what ends did the office workers and youth brigade laborers put the corn and rice? Evidently, they consumed the rice or shipped it off elsewhere but used the corn to legitimate rapidly changing, localizing relations of rule. When the military's General Department of Politics departed in August 1954, they left not only a hungry population but also nascent civilian institutions to handle hunger's political effects. In a pattern consistent with the unintended consequences of intensive claim-making, Mường Lay's Thái farmers were hungry in August and

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6-7, 10; UBHC Mường Lay, “Báo cáo tổng kết thuế nông nghiệp,” 25 Nov 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 102.

September. Although summer was (and still is) a season of annual food insecurity, mobilizing scarce food resources no doubt depleted household stocks. Even forest tubers had been stretched beyond their capacity to provide a substitute.<sup>172</sup> It was another instance of bureaucratic segments within the DRV working at cross purposes. District officials had to clean up a mess made by the People's Army. With the departure of the military supply network, they had to find a creative solution to a pressing political problem.

To deal with popular hunger, district officials once again turned to what they had learned, and what they could accomplish, through emerging forms of reciprocal exchange. First, they made several observations regarding local disparities between swidden and wet-rice cultivators. Whereas Thái farmers relied on rice, Hmong farmers cultivated a wide variety of crops including corn. The State Shops registered a lively trade with the latter who drew on corn surplus to buy salt and cloth. Hmong farmers also sold vegetables, squash, and livestock (ducks, chickens, goats) to “many people.” In the meantime, hungry Thái residents “borrowed” corn from their upland neighbors, indicating local forms of exchange.<sup>173</sup> Second, district officials drew on these observations to position the “Government” as uniquely capable of solving the problem of hunger—conditions to which the very same “Government” had contributed! The 25 tons of corn that the district “borrowed” from Hmong cultivators in August was then “loaned” to hungry Thái people, including Lai Châu town residents, tiding them over until the rice crop matured.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Lam Sung, “Báo cáo...” 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 4, 9-10.

<sup>173</sup> Reportedly, Hmong areas provided higher amounts of each good than Thái areas. Why? Hmong swidden farmers grew more diverse cultivars than wet-rice farmers, increasing the likelihood that one or more of them turned into good harvests. Hmong peoples likely felt more alienated by the Thái Federation and, therefore, were more inclined to support an alternative. It is also likely that higher elevation of swidden fields sheltered them from lowland combat.

<sup>174</sup> Lam Sung, “Báo cáo...” 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 5, 9-10.

In so doing, the district intercepted and reconfigured local patterns of exchange. By mediating the movement of use value, district cadres appropriated corn's exchange value to legitimate their own rule. As such, the actions of Mường Lay's officials fit a broader pattern. Regulating material—and deeply symbolic—exchanges both contributed towards making a planned economy and obscured complex relations of rule as akin to a singular, caring, and benevolent figure.

Like the claims on food resources that continued through 1954 and beyond, *dân công* service requirements did not stop with May's victory in Điện Biên. In fact, determining just when exactly the campaign ended reveals deep source disagreement. Unlike the Central Council on Front Supply's declaration that the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign ended in May with "victory," Lai Châu Province continued to pursue this same campaign—by the same name—through July when the last French prisoners of war departed.<sup>175</sup> Temporal boundaries structuring the practices of counting and accounting, therefore, were themselves vague and conflicting.

Even in Lai Châu Province's district of Mường Lay it is unclear when the three waves of labor mobilization for the nominal Điện Biên Phủ Campaign occurred. If they began with "liberation" (presumably in December), when did these waves end—May or July? Perhaps as late as August? No dates are provided. What is clear is that many more thousands of Mường Lay's residents were "required to serve" the military or to work on roadcrews. In July, the military called on 800 residents to assist with hunting down "bandits" holding out along the Sino-Lao-Vietnamese border in Mường Bum and Sìn Hồ; each of them worked for two months. From September through December, the district both called on another 638 laborers to do "random, general tasks" such as rebuilding houses and constructing a market; and recruited another 933 people to do roadwork. Added to the 4,003 involved in "the campaign," the district

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<sup>175</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, "Báo cáo..." 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 10.

summarized these figures as 5,736 *dân công* “serving large projects” and 638 *dân công* on “short term mobilization” for a combined 1954 total of 6,374 people. To these so-called “summary” statistics, the district added a caveat: the sums “do not count” another 2,867 laborers working out on Road 41 or still another 500 “laborers in the process of being mobilized.”<sup>176</sup>

Adding these uncounted totals to the official account means that 9,741 people in Mường Lay district were called on to provide *dân công* labor in 1954. If the report conceals this total, then revealing it underlines the intensity and extent of labor mobilization. Assuming no repeat service assignments among participants, close to half the district’s entire population worked as a *dân công* laborer at some point during 1954. On average, 3.4 members of each household—half of each household’s average composition of 7 individuals—worked off-farm at some point.

These figures from just one district in one year alone may indicate an exceptional drudgery but they are hardly unique and, moreover, point to the remaking of regional rule. Mường Lay’s experience may represent, what the Chairman of the Lai Châu Province Committee called, “a particularly heavy burden on labor resources” relative to the province’s other districts.<sup>177</sup> That Lò Văn Hặc made this statement raises the possibility that disproportionate labor service may also have functioned as collective punishment for the wrongs of his avowed enemies in the Thái Federation. Whatever his motives, the rise of this one Black Thái star—among others like him—at the expense of White Thái compradors indicates regionally specific elite formation and the reproduction of Thái rule.

For the masses, militarized legitimation and coercion discussed in Mường Lay illustrate spatially broader and temporally ongoing patterns of claim-making on their

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<sup>176</sup> Lam Sung, “Báo cáo...” 12 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC tỉnh Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 2.

<sup>177</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 March 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 11.

agrarian resources. Just as mobilization during war foreshadowed and stimulated the agricultural tax, so too did it routinize off-farm labor duties. Making and securing claims on the Thái Federation's territory was not just an end of DRV state-making in the Black River region but also a fundamental means to this end. Just as important, and reciprocally constituted, were making and securing claims on a re-territorialized population's labor and food resources. Lai Châu, like the spatially reconfigured border outpost at Điện Biên Phủ, was now a site within a national frontier.

### ***Beyond the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign***

For residents of Mường Lay District, of its encompassing Lai Châu Province, and of the Northwest Zone more broadly, the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign was only one of three “large” tasks in 1954 requiring mobilization of peasant labor and foodstocks. First, the nominal Điện Biên Phủ Campaign—supposedly ending in May—continued locally until August. Second, the People's Army waged another military campaign in Lai Châu's northern reaches in July against remnant French and allied forces. Although this campaign aimed to “eradicate bandits” (*tiêu phi*) in the interim before the Geneva cease-fire agreement took effect, armed resistance nonetheless continued in Lào Cai through at least early 1955. Third, roadwork started anew in August: improving and repairing Road 41 linking the Northwest Zone to downstream territories; as well as remaking the Glorious Line into a sealed road to the Chinese border. All this regional military and infrastructure work—and the labor and provisions it required of local residents—carried over into the next calendar year of 1955.<sup>178</sup> Bounding the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign temporally and making it a discrete event discounts these subsequent and ongoing mobilizations.

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<sup>178</sup> Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam, Ban Chấp hành Khu Tây Bắc, “Nghị Quyết: Chương trình công tác 3 tháng đầu năm 1955,” 21 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg, file no. 6, p. 3-5; Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo

Although residents from Lai Châu, for example, continued working as civilian laborers, the province lost count of how many worked. With regards to uncounted labor recruited for military activities, the Chairman of the Provincial Committee blamed the districts for “not summarizing specific counts” in his report of March 1955.<sup>179</sup> Lò Văn Hặc overlooked the readily available report issued by Mường Lay District in December 1954 discussed above. Does this indicate unintentional gaps in intra-government communication? Or deliberate concealment from his superiors of Mường Lay’s unfair treatment? It is all too likely that this officialized Black Thái lord reserved punishment for the White Thái people he felt had betrayed him. Either way, miscounting was part of a broader pattern.

With regards to labor allocated to roadwork, the province recounted only those laborers from the province who worked in the province. Lai Châu’s annual 1954 report registered two mobilization waves of 1,985 and 1,305 *dân công* from August to December, all of whom worked for two months turning the Glorious Line into a road. The report did not count the number of laborers who worked in other provinces on the regional route of Road 41.

More revealingly, in addition to and pursuant with these three “large” tasks, Lò Văn Hặc noted that the “routine mobilization of *dân công*” to transport military supplies, improve roads, build granaries, and “other miscellaneous, trifling work was uncountable.”<sup>180</sup> The alleged uncountability of *dân công* labor points both to its pervasive and abundant practice as well as diminished capacity to count or unwillingness to recount burdensome claims on labor power. For the people who

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cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 10-11; ĐLĐVN, BCHKTb, “Báo cáo thành 1 năm 1955,” 1 Feb 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg, file no. 6, p. 1-2, 5.

<sup>179</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 11.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.* The original is more interesting than my translation conveys. It reads, “...các công tác linh tinh khác không thống kê được.” The word “thống kê” is a noun meaning statistics; the report’s author rendered it a predicate, as in “cannot be statististic-alized” or “is unstatistic-able.”



performed this labor, none of the work required of them—as citizens of Vietnam and subjects of officialized Thái lords—was ever “trifling.” Separated from families and farms, anyone who did *dân công* labor for months at a time endured drudgery that posed hazards to one’s self, family, and community—all for uncertain rewards.

What had changed with regards to claim-making was not the practice itself but, rather, institutionalized capacity to account for and enumerate its results. On the one hand, local elites recognized as DRV officials, such as Lò Văn Hặc, gained renewed power and ability to claim local labor and supplies. On the other hand, the dissolution or departure of centralized agencies—the civilian Council on Front Supply in May and the military’s General Department of Politics in August, respectively—left the Central Government with diminished capacity to know the activities of local and regional institutions. Further, the withdrawal of a formidable supply network meant that local and regional authorities no longer fully accounted and recounted claims. As such, centrally-organized institutional capacity throughout the Northwest Zone actually decreased after the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign.<sup>181</sup> Not only does this fact belie linear growth in centrally organized power and the finality of its establishment. It may also point to a renewed ability among Black River elites to use DRV office as a means to enhance their own power.

For the Northwest Zone’s rising civilian authorities more broadly, clearing their balance sheets of debt in the wake of the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign “met many difficulties.” During the 1954 round of taxation, cadres found among loaning residents both a lack of evidence and gaps in knowledge: payees complained of having never been issued, or “misplaced,” their receipts; or they professed “not knowing” their loan quantities or 1953 tax assessment.<sup>182</sup> Whether these were acts of dissemblance aimed

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<sup>181</sup> Cf., Quảng Văn Đức, “Kiểm điểm thực hiện chính sách dân tộc thiểu số qua công tác chống đói,” July 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Khu tự trị Tây Bắc, file no. 2756, p. 3.

<sup>182</sup> Khu Tây Bắc, “Báo cáo...” 27 Apr 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 3, 10.

to dodge taxes, honest forgetfulness, or omissions by harried supply officers is unclear. What is clear is that regional authorities assumed responsibility for an accounting mess the Central Government had helped create. Like other military campaigns, this largest one featured an underlying cyclical pattern of unintended consequences, further undercutting a linear narrative telos.

Military campaigns and hunger in the Northwest followed a cyclical pattern—combat and hunger and then more hunger. Just as in 1950 after the failed general uprising and in 1953 after the Northwest Campaign, the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign depleted household reserves across the region, leaving local producers short of food. This was not what Lò Văn Hặc called, “perennial compatriot hunger” as though outside of history.<sup>183</sup> Rather, food insecurity was produced and reproduced through intensive, repeated militarized claim-making. Indeed, the policy of mobilization in place and combat itself had hidden costs both during and after the campaign. During the campaign, residents everywhere were hungry. Afterwards, the incidence and severity of hunger increased directly in relation to proximity to former and current military fronts.

Hunger radiated outwards from the fighting in waves, first during the campaign and then, again, during the autumn months before the rice crop matured (*giáp hạt*). The first wave occurred in April-May before the corn crop came in. Residents in Điện Biên, Quỳnh Nhai, Sìn Hồ, and Mường Tè found food, “only by going into the forest to dig tubers and collect plants.” Just as corn helped tide over Mường Lay’s residents in July-August, the corn crop provided some nourishment for residents of these other districts in June and July.<sup>184</sup> At hunger’s center was the Mường Thanh plain where fighting had forced its residents to abandon their fields,

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<sup>183</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 March 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 6, 11.

<sup>184</sup> Ty Công an Lai Châu, “Báo cáo...” 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 5.

wander about, and scratch tubers from the forest floor. Much of this rice basket then remained unusable for several planting seasons: the scarred, mined, and pockmarked battlefield removed some 377 hectares from production for years afterwards.<sup>185</sup> In neighboring Tuần Giáo, where residents “exceeded quotas” during the campaign by “loaning a lot to the Government,” families were left, “with only 10-15 days’ worth of foodstocks.”<sup>186</sup> That summer, the monsoon rains did not come and, as the official in Điện Biên had predicted, drought conditions exacerbated conditions of hunger. Consequently, before the rice crop matured in autumn, a second, even more severe wave of hunger spread in August-October throughout Lai Châu.<sup>187</sup> By the time of the normally festive lunar new year (*Tết*) in early 1955, Kinh youth brigades joining the locally-recruited roadcrews had no rice to celebrate but ate meager gruel instead.<sup>188</sup>

Conditions of hunger indicated, and contributed to, broader tensions of rule in a consolidating but still heavily contested frontier. In September, Lai Châu provincial authorities organized Border Police units, part of a larger Northwest Zone program to regulate cross-border movement.<sup>189</sup> Officials linked border patrols explicitly with other “large official business,” especially *dân công* work and agricultural taxation. For their subjects as well, borders, taxes, and labor service all figured together. By October 1954 as the reduced rice harvest approached and the tax season loomed, what was recorded as “enemy propaganda” found a receptive audience. “Over in Laos,” went a

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<sup>185</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 12; Khu Tây Bắc, “Báo cáo...” 27 Apr 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 4.

<sup>186</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 6, 11-12.

<sup>187</sup> TCALC, “Báo cáo...” 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 5; Khu Tây Bắc, “Báo cáo...” 27 Apr 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621, p. 4; ĐLĐVN, Ban Cán sự tỉnh Lai Châu, “Báo cáo tóm tắt tình hình công tác tháng 1, năm 1955,” 31 Jan 1955, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 3.

<sup>188</sup> ĐLĐVN, BCSTLC, “Báo cáo...” 31 Jan 1955, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 2.

<sup>189</sup> TCALC, “Báo cáo...” 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 9; ĐLĐVN, BCSKTb, “Báo cáo...” 1 Feb 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg, file no. 6, p. 2.

typical line, “there are no obligations to work as *dân công*, no obligations to pay taxes, and the Việt Minh is unable to stop you.”<sup>190</sup>

If taxation and *dân công* service required a stable, sedentary population, then some peasants responded by mobilizing themselves to avoid these claims. In increasing numbers through January 1955, peasants voted with their feet. Some, like 36 Dao families from Mường Lay who migrated to Sìn Hồ, crossed into districts to seek lighter labor obligations.<sup>191</sup> Many more took advantage of territorial sovereignty’s limits, and the newly recognized national frontier, by departing Vietnam for refuge elsewhere. Some 15 families from Sìn Hồ crossed over into China but soon returned, raising suspicions among the Zone’s officials.<sup>192</sup> Overall, the preferred destination for the Northwest’s outmigrants was Laos. Some 19 Hmong families from Mường Tè crossed into Laos; after officials persuaded 16 of them to return, they explained, “only because of fear of going on *dân công* and paying taxes did we flee.” From October 1954, “reactionaries in Điện Biên were hectically mobilizing the people to cross to Laos”; by January 1955 at least some 59 families had fled, some of them never to return.<sup>193</sup> Mobilization, evidently, could also work actively against DRV interests. By late 1955, self-mobilization reduced the 1954 population of Điện Biên District by an astonishing 14%, or over 3200 people.<sup>194</sup>

All these examples from Lai Châu province illustrate a broader trend of cross-

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<sup>190</sup> Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 March 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 3, 5.

<sup>191</sup> Also, swidden cultivators moved from district to district to tend fields straddling these boundaries.

<sup>192</sup> Were they spies for Chinese Nationalists? Suspected members of the Vietnam Nationalist Party? Or did they simply realize that conditions in Vietnam were preferable to the PRC’s Great Leap Forward?

<sup>193</sup> ĐLĐVN, BCSTLC, “Báo cáo...” 31 Jan 1955, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 1-2; Lò Văn Hặc, “Báo cáo...” 5 Mar 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 542, p. 3; TCALC, “Báo cáo...” 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 4; ĐLĐVN, BCHTB, “Báo cáo...” 1 Feb 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg, file no. 6, p. 1-2.

<sup>194</sup> District populations: 22,600 (late 1954); 19,372 (late 1955); 19, 875 (mid-1956). TCALC, “Báo cáo...” 25 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Sơn-Lai, file no. 90, p. 5; UBHC Châu Điện Biên, “Báo cáo tổng kết công tác 1 năm 1955,” 5 Jan 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 26, p. 6; Phòng thủy lợi kiến trúc, “Báo cáo công tác điều tra tình hình ruộng đất Châu Điện Biên,” 15 May 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 3177, p. 3.

border movements happening simultaneously for similar reasons all across the Northwest Zone. To the south in Son La, people from Mộc Châu, Yên Châu, and Sông Mã, responded to a call, to “come over to Laos where there is no tax, no *dân công*.”<sup>195</sup> That such arguments were persuasive indicates the contested legitimacy of claims on agrarian resources as well as the fragility of state efforts to regulate a footloose population territorially. In a region with long and permeable borders, population movement and efforts to regulate it demonstrate the limits of territorial sovereignty. For all those who fled, flight was an escape from intolerable relations of rule.

Most of the Black River region’s peoples, however, did remain in a frontier of a newly recognized Vietnam as agents in and subjects of an ongoing state-making project. If state formation and mobilization unfolded together historically, they were not always in concert. During the military campaign, bureaucratic segments with an ostensibly unified “state” jostled over access to and allocation of resources. After the campaign, the departure of centralized bureaucracies allowed regional and local elites to reassert power and to position themselves, in the name of state, to claim an increasing share of resources. Mobilization during and after the campaign may have enabled radical cadres to identify stalwarts with proper class backgrounds and to train them for official positions. Yet making mobilization work also relied on—and reproduced—the hybridized authority of local elites, many of whom were “feudal” lords or “kulaks” who subverted a centrally-directed reform agenda.

Mobilizing the masses might secure resources for a statist project but levying excessive claims could just as easily delegitimize these enmeshed and (re)emerging relations of rule. The policing, coercion, and violence that accompanied mobilization from late 1953 through 1954 may be seen as cause *and* effect of popular discontent. Just as mobile peasants demonstrated the limits of territorial sovereignty, coercion

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<sup>195</sup> ĐLĐVN, BCHKTĐ, “Báo cáo...” 1 Feb 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg, file no. 6, p. 1-2.

demonstrated the limits of formal legitimation work. Although this second phase in militarized claim-making did lean more towards coercion, domination was never total nor did reciprocal exchange cease to exist. Even among the strongest People's Army force assembled during the entire anti-colonial war and amidst its bloodiest fighting, residents of Điện Biên District demonstrated resistance, compliance, and refusal. Even in a district with no direct exposure to the DRV save for its military rule, residents of Mường Lay District engaged in forms of symbolic and material exchange.

The intensity and expanse of mobilization in 1954 raises one final question in relation to reciprocal exchange in 1953. Why did more people appear to go hungry and starve during a lighter period of militarized claim-making in 1953 than the heavier period of 1954?

The difference may be simply a matter of annual weather vagaries in growing conditions and highly variable local production.<sup>196</sup> Or it may be related to the road construction and bureaucratic organization that accompanied militarized state-making. If we hold weather factors and production constant, one might surmise that infrastructure preparation, consolidation of contested territory, rationalization of service requirements, and increased flow of capital and consumption goods together nipped 1954 hunger in the bud before it developed into starvation.<sup>197</sup> According to one report, when hunger did appear in 1954, transportation to affected communities was “easier than before because bandits and enemies no longer shot and sabotaged

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<sup>196</sup> Both wet rice and dry field (swidden) cultivation at this time were highly dependent on monsoon rains. Growing seasons in both periods were affected by rainfall perturbations yet, in the absence of reliable data, it is hard to assess whether gross production changed significantly. Moreover, gross figures would do little to capture fine granularity in growing conditions across topographical relief and soil variety, all of which cause local variance from *muang* to *muang* and by elevation.

<sup>197</sup> In contrast to haphazard recruitment in 1952-53, the rationalization of *dân công* service in late 1953 led cadres to organize workteams in 1954 to assist households depleted by such service. The centrally-organized supply network in 1953-54 may have provided rice after the campaign just as increasing provision of tools may have enabled farmers to open fallow land. What were multiple and criss-crossing fronts in 1952-53 during mobile warfare might have been more damaging to land and demanding on the local population than fixed warfare and a singularized front in 1953-54.

them.”<sup>198</sup> Certainly, the (partial) end of war and an improved road network for distributing food aid might have helped hungry people. The report fails to mention, however, that improved transportation infrastructure resulted directly from local labor, recruited at a time when the mid-1953 “bridges and roads campaign” corresponded with local hunger and starvation.

Moreover, I would argue that only if we go beyond the temporal boundaries structuring knowledge of Điện Biên Phủ—as battle, campaign, and the French war’s endpoint—can we better assess the uncounted costs of militarization and a cumulative lag effect. Again, hunger serves to indicate broader social conditions and to reveal the unintended consequences of militarizing an agrarian economy. “The food problem during the resistance was extremely difficult,” reads the opening line of a report on grain shortages in 1955. “Now that peace has returned,” it continues, the food problem, “has only become more difficult.”<sup>199</sup> If this report was speaking about the DRV as a whole, then the statement went double for its northwest corner. Although drought and pest conditions in 1955 caused hunger throughout the region, hunger was conspicuously pronounced among the same Black River populations affected by combat and claim-making during 1953 and 1954.<sup>200</sup> If farmers survived the hunger in 1954 by tightening their belts, then they had drastically diminished resources—energy, livestock, and foodstocks—to survive hunger in 1955.<sup>201</sup> Repeatedly gathering

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<sup>198</sup> Quảng Văn Đức, “Kiểm điểm...” July 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 2756, p. 3

<sup>199</sup> Anonymous, “Báo cáo về vấn đề thiếu lương thực năm 1955,” 1955, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2632, p. 1.

<sup>200</sup> Including Điện Biên and Mường Tè districts, Lai Châu Province; Mộc Châu and Phù Yên, Sơn La; Than Uyên in Lào Cai. Quảng Văn Đức, “Kiểm điểm...” Jul 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC Khu tự trị Tây Bắc, file no. 2756, p. 3-4; Hà Xuân Tu, Sở Nông Lâm Khu Tự trị Thái Mèo, “Sơ bộ báo cáo công tác và tình hình sản xuất nông lâm nghiệp,” 7 Dec 1955, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 3167.

<sup>201</sup> Water buffalo in Điện Biên, and the farmers who relied on their draft labor, suffered a particularly heavy blow from warfare: for example, before the French war farmers in Thanh Lương Commune had 2500 water buffalo; by the start of the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign, they had only 1000; a year later, 350 had died from landmines, leaving them with only 310 water buffalo—or 12% of their initial herd. Other communes “had no animals at all.” Phòng thủy lực kiến trúc, “Báo cáo...” 15 May 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 3177, p. 3.

supplies and recruiting labor from people already experiencing annual food insecurity now appeared to reach a logical, sad conclusion. By the close of 1955, a regional report stated that 32,503 people were “hungry”—10% of the Zone’s population—and listed 41 dead of “exhaustion.”<sup>202</sup> Even in a time of ostensible peace, then, militarization and concomitant state resource claims bore hidden, and all-too-often unaccounted for, social costs.

Claims are not only about resources but also about meaning, truth, and knowledge. To challenge the spatial and temporal boundaries structuring knowledge of Điện Biên Phủ one must first acknowledge the effects of a powerful state-making project. State-sponsored national origin myths essentialize Điện Biên Phủ in 1954 as the end of colonialism and the dawn of an equally essentialized unitary, modern Vietnam. Even its very Vietnamese name—an administrative border outpost—belies the place’s historic multiple sovereignty and enduring contests as well as the contingency of this one outcome. Making a national frontier oriented towards a singular center involved violence and, after the fact, silencing alternate trajectories and concealing multiple understandings of its past. Tracing a local place name, Mường Thanh—or heavenly *muang*—reveals people in place with their own center, different communal forms, and complex histories, none of which begin or end in 1954. Rather, they start long before and move through the date into an unfolding present.

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<sup>202</sup> Quảng Văn Đức, “Kiểm điểm...” July 1956, NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTB, file no. 2756, p. 3.



## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Official military historians argue that “the whole country” of Vietnam came together to fight for the “complete victory” of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954.<sup>1</sup> How and why did Vietnam emerge in Điện Biên Phủ—at this time, in this form, and in this place?

From a state-making perspective, we can answer this question based on processes and relations of legitimation, mobilization, militarization, and the reconfiguration of local rule. But in some ways, the official argument and the resulting question assume, incorrectly, that “Vietnam” was fully and finally formed in 1954; to the contrary, Vietnam was and remains an ongoing project. The fact that a battle over a frontier outpost has come to assume center stage in national mythology is itself analytically significant: Điện Biên Phủ figures as shorthand for the lasting achievement of a unified Vietnam—nation, state, and territory—all arising triumphantly from the final defeat of colonialism.<sup>2</sup> The battle over this marginal place in 1954 figures centrally in national mythology in part because an idea of “complete victory” there masks incompleteness both there and elsewhere. Understanding the processes and outcomes of statemaking involves tugging at the loose ends of a singular nationalist narrative and unraveling multiple alternative histories.

If official narratives explain the outcome of Điện Biên Phủ as a result of voluntarism, then scholars frequently explain mass participation there as a result of

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<sup>1</sup> “Even though economic conditions were still scanty,” reads the Ministry of Defense’s history, “the people from all localities still voluntarily contributed to the resistance Government tens of thousands of tons of food; many localities in the South and in the North’s delta surpassed targets. The whole country devoted all their energy to the complete victory at Điện Biên Phủ.” Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, *Lịch sử cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp 1945-1954*, vol II (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1994), 373.

<sup>2</sup> For comparison with the American West, cf., Ned Blackhawk, *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

popular consent predicated on land reform. According to this consensual explanation, peasants chose freely to support the anti-colonial struggle based on a rational understanding of costs and benefits. The National Assembly's decision in December 1953 to pursue mass mobilization for land reform in a time of war indicated elite determination and stimulated a sense of possibility among a peasantry eager for change. Whether referred to as a "propaganda effect" or as the force behind "national integration," this perspective enjoys broad support.<sup>3</sup> Yet it explains only partially why many—but not all—peasants endured hardship as soldiers and laborers during the final, bloodiest phase of the French war.

The rational consent hypothesis does not account for the spatial unevenness in the implementation of land reform. As discussed in Chapter 4, land reform in the emerging Northwest Zone followed neither the same timeline nor the same procedures as elsewhere in DRV-claimed northern Vietnam. Some scholars who argue for the consent hypothesis credit the Ethnic Policy for "unifying the struggle among the ethnic minority compatriots" and "creating great energy of mutual assistance."<sup>4</sup> Though this explanation does account for land reform's spatial gaps, it leaves untested a Party-state claim to unified and enlightened leadership among people who often greeted this claim skeptically. In wake of the 1952 Northwest Campaign, the "newly liberated" population was hungry and, in some places, even starving. Further, during and between the Northwest and Điện Biên Phủ Campaigns, some residents fled rather than serve and many more expressed anxiety over state demands for provisions and

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<sup>3</sup> Cf., Cao Văn Lượng, "Đường lối gương cao ngọn cờ độc lập dân tộc và chủ nghĩa xã hội với chiến thắng Điện Biên Phủ" and Nguyễn Hữu Hợp & Nguyễn Hữu Đạo, "Sức mạnh tổng hợp của cả nước và chiến thắng Điện Biên Phủ," in Viện sử học, *Mấy vấn đề về chiến thắng lịch sử Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1985), 38-41, 100-101; Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 256-257; Thiếu tướng Phạm Kiệt, "Đường lên mặt trận," in Võ Nguyên Giáp et al, *Vài hồi ức về Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Quân đội Nhân dân, 1975), 292; Christine Pelzer White, "Agrarian Reform and National Liberation in the Vietnamese Revolution, 1920-1957" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1981), 199-202.

<sup>4</sup> Nguyễn Hữu Hợp & Nguyễn Hữu Đạo, "Sức mạnh..." in Viện sử học (1985), 100-101.

labor. Socially and materially, these conditions hardly explain a willingness to part with scarce resources in exchange for uncertain rewards.

Evidence from the Black River region, therefore, raises broader questions. How, and on what terms, did agents of state and military enlist socially diverse peasantries to support the war effort? How did mobilization work there?

A nuanced argument must recognize that military action—i.e., organized coercive force—accompanied social mobilization. The practice and process of militarized mobilization was, in turn, embedded in broader processes of legitimation, making a planned economy, and centralizing power. I argued in Chapters 5 and 6 that state formation accelerated during, and because of, warfare.<sup>5</sup> Although its form was initially “limited,” mobilization transformed state-society relations such that a territorializing DRV could claim an ever-larger portion of local resources to serve war-making. The rapid expansion of state power meant that newly instantiated structures incorporated older relations of rule to claim peasant resources—sometimes unwillingly. A complex combination of coercion and consent accompanied the legitimation and institutionalization of power, all of which enabled a rising state to appropriate resources located, self-consciously, in a nationalized society.

Learning from the Northwest Campaign increased DRV institutional capacities to equip the People’s Army during the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign. In what would be the last phase of the first Indochina War, efforts to centralize knowledge and power among a political elite enabled even more intensive mobilization in, and more extensive mobilization of, the emergent Northwest Zone.<sup>6</sup> Development and taxation, for example, were never restricted to the economy as such but, rather, worked

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<sup>5</sup> Cf., Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 67-70; Michael Geyer, “The Militarization of Europe, 1914-1945,” in *The Militarization of the Western World*, ed. John Gillis (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 79.

<sup>6</sup> Max Weber wrote, “Bureaucratic administration means fundamentally domination through knowledge.” *Economy and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 225.

complementarily as political technologies: just as development increased production and justified state intervention, taxation increased state knowledge and secured claims to any production increase. State learning was predicated on modern ideas of progress, of linear improvement over time. Bureaucrat cadres learned from their experiences, increasing institutional capacities iteratively to secure growing claims on agrarian resources. Militarized state-making expanded the territory subject to, and rationalized the authority of, a rising bureaucracy. Through practices of counting and accounting, emerging institutions increased capacity to know, regulate, and normalize claim-making practices.

All the while, the cadres who made state institutions did so, in part, by performing their power among an audience well-acquainted with an allied military's force. Through education and propaganda, they shaped popular consent, self-consciously legitimating their power to claim from, and contribute towards creating, a national society. The omnipresent armed forces and intensified police work served as potent reminders: if consent ever failed to yield resources, coercion was always there to back it up. Moreover, state-sponsored terror, either through everyday displays of military violence or by hunting and killing political opponents, silenced oppositional forms and dissident voices.

As important as processes and practices of counting and accounting are to state making, to study them critically means also being aware of powerful bureaucratic tendencies embedded in official narrative recounting. First, state knowledge did not accrete linearly: the accrual process was not only broken by gaps, silences, miscounts, and obfuscations but also built on a cyclical temporality embedded in annual agricultural production. This tension between cycles of production and iterative efforts to capture its yields contributed to unintended resource depletion, mass hunger, and starvation—the traces of which are all too often forgotten or discounted. Second,

centralized state capacity was not established finally and fully forever. The departure of central accounting agencies as well as the military and its supply network allowed officialized regional and local elites to reassert old power in new form. Third, a violence of abstraction is not only visible but all too often taken for granted in official reports. If mobilization contributed towards making new subjectivities and collectivities, then we must beware its representational effects. Official reports produce diverse peoples and living subjects as nameless peasants and numbered *dân công*—what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “human beings defined as producers.”<sup>7</sup> Subsequent recounting in other reports and in nationalist and official histories takes the additional step of reproducing these producers as “contributors”—always already defined in relation to a national state project. These are hazards of representation, of reconstructing the past from officially archived sources and from secondary sources that readily accept their terms.

I have attempted to tell a history of human beings as complex, thinking persons with wayward agendas who did not always respond as intended. In spite of powerful statist efforts to dominate the Black River’s many communities, peoples there did not always accept terms of legitimation predicated on their membership in a singular, national community. Even amidst quickening and increasingly violent statemaking processes, domination and legitimation worked partially, contingently, and unevenly. That Điện Biên Phủ and the Black River region remain a frontier stands as testimony to their peoples’ willingness and ability to present themselves as somehow different than what others ascribe to them.

Reading archival sources ethnographically provides a method for the study of

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<sup>7</sup> Reflecting on the failure of state communism, Jean-Luc Nancy critiqued what he considered the “betrayal” of the communist ideal: “namely, human beings defined as producers (one might even add: human beings *defined* at all), and fundamentally as the producers of their own essence in the form of their labor or their work.” *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 2.

statemaking as well as its multiple silences, erasures, and reconstructions. In August 1954, for example, the Northwest Zone's Administrative Committee held its first congress to assess the Zone's construction from 1952 to 1954 and plan more of the same. In October, a representative issued a report now archived in Hanoi in the Prime Minister Secretariat's record group, indicating its intended Central Government audience. In one revealing passage, the original author wrote in type and an anonymous editor added some hand-written corrections:

We have already completed two duties: preparing and serving the \_x\_ Điện Biên campaign and Mobilizing the masses. In particular, performing {great} service to the \_(x)\_ campaign by surpassing targets ahead of time earned the people and Cadres of the Northwest the Government's highest Order for Resistance.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, the content here is significant, indicating recognition at the center of a margin's exemplary performance.<sup>9</sup> But what is relevant to this discussion of archival ethnography is the long-hand editing that accompanies the typed passage. Someone circled the author's use of the descriptor {great} (*vĩ đại*) and placed one circled \_(x)\_ mark and one uncircled \_x\_ mark inside the passage to indicate the descriptor's allegedly proper placement. In the margins, the anonymous editor wrote, "great Điện Biên." As such, the edited passage no longer reads a "great service" but, rather, features the "great Điện Biên campaign" twice. The Zone's subsequent reports to the center used "great" according to the editor's corrections.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than discount these editorial remarks, I argue they need to be counted as

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<sup>8</sup> Le Trung Dinh, UBHC Khu Tây Bắc, "Báo cáo kiểm điểm xây dựng Khu Tây Bắc từ khi thành lập đến nay (7-1952 đến 7-1954 trước hội nghị kháng chiến hành chính và chuyên môn khu hợp lần đầu tiên (8-1954)," 16 Oct 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 520, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Note how the Northwest brings people, cadres, and territory all together, as though preternaturally unified. Also, capitalizing the normally lower case cadre (*Cán bộ*) elevates their significance above the people (*nhân dân*) and makes them equivalent to the always capitalized Government (*Chính phủ*).

<sup>10</sup> Cf., Nguyen Huy Thanh, UBHC Khu Tây Bắc, "Báo cáo sơ kết đợt 1 công tác thuế nông nghiệp vụ đông 54 ở hai tỉnh Sơn La và Lai Châu," 13 Nov 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 2621.

efforts in an ongoing process of *recounting*, of shaping and reshaping collective understandings of the past. Indeed, the anonymous editor above seemed to act in response to an earlier central directive, indicating recognition of centralized power. Only two days after the battle's conclusion at Điện Biên Phủ, central elites claimed credit for its outcome and publicized how its meaning should be understood. In a letter dated 9 May, the VWP's Central Executive Committee praised the "great success of our people and military" and, in spite of enthusiasm over the "great victory," admonished them to remain vigilant with respect to ongoing "enemy" plots.<sup>11</sup> Not only did Party leaders urge continued militarization, but *vĩ đại* is also the same descriptor that later prompted editorial revision. In a similar twist, the volume in which the 9 May letter appeared was subjected to rewriting when its editors added a title to the originally untitled document. In the 2001 edition—attributed not to the VWP but to its Communist Party of Vietnam successor—other editors expanded on the original's use of an undifferentiated "people and military" to include, "all comrade cadres, officers and sibling *dân công* at the Điện Biên Phủ Front, and local compatriots."<sup>12</sup> In this instance, editing elided a distinction between ruling parties and differentiated subjects according to rank, family membership, and ethnic identity.

Two days after the Central Executive Committee's letter, on 11 May 1954 the Party Secretary's Committee issued an order to organize propaganda celebrating the victory at Điện Biên Phủ, both specifying the means of its dissemination and spelling out the event's meaning. Among others, one slogan read: "Trust thoroughly in the clear-sighted leadership of President Hồ, the Party, and the Government."<sup>13</sup> These decisions, their content, and their subsequent edits all indicate a powerful intent both

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<sup>11</sup> "Thư của Ban chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam," 9 May 1954, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 15, yr 1954 (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 2001), 94-95.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> "Chỉ thị của Ban Bí thư về việc tổ chức cuộc tuyên truyền động viên mở rộng thắng lợi của Chiến dịch Điện Biên Phủ," 11 May 1954, *Văn kiện Đảng* vol 15, yr 1954 (2001), 103.

to legitimize centralized rule and to craft a meaningful end to a brutal war. Central elites enmeshed in DRV state and ruling Party had embarked on moving Điện Biên Phủ out of its place and re-constructing it as an event.

The original orders and reports from 1954 were only the beginning of a sustained commemorative project. If the Party established an event, then official historians continue efforts to dominate its interpretation, bound it in space and time, and fix it with a singular meaning out of a wide range of possibilities.<sup>14</sup> During the American War, Điện Biên Phủ was even loosened from its spatial and temporal moorings and reconfigured as a metaphor for militarized social mobilization in an urban setting.<sup>15</sup> In response to the US Government's ill-conceived Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972-1973, the DRV launched a "Điện Biên Phủ Campaign in the skies" to galvanize civilian air-defense.<sup>16</sup> On the occasion of the original battle's 40<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries, official historians and military leaders were still working hard to determine how one should interpret Điện Biên Phủ.<sup>17</sup> Their efforts are ongoing, their legacies written into the landscape. Mường Thanh's valley floor is carpeted with memorials, cemeteries, historical markers, museums, old tanks and artillery pieces, preserved battle sites, etc. As such, this ongoing effort to capture and secure symbolic meaning places official historical writing and commemoration in service to political legitimation.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf., "Preface" and Ch 26 ("Some lessons of the anti-French resistance war as the foundation for developing the path and means of the anti-American resistance war"), in Viện Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam, vol II (1995).

<sup>15</sup> For more on relations between event and metaphor, cf., Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Historical fiction can be read as a response to these statist efforts both to dominate an event's meaning and to remove Điện Biên Phủ from space and time. Cf., Hữu Mai, *Điện Biên Phủ: thời gian và không gian* (Hanoi: Thanh niên, 1979); Trần Dân, *Người người lớp lớp* (Hanoi: NXB Hội nhà văn, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Cf., the pamphlet *Hà Nội - Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: Sở Văn hoá Thông tin Hà Nội, 1973).

<sup>17</sup> Appendix, "Nhận định về ý nghĩa của chiến dịch ĐBP (lời tuyên bố với các nhà báo)" [or, "appraising the meaning of the ĐBP campaign (a guide for reporters)"], in Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Điện Biên Phủ* (Hanoi: NXB Chính trị Quốc gia, 1994), 314-319; Chu Ngọc Sơn et al, eds., *Ấn tượng Điện Biên / Điện Biên Impression* (Hanoi: NXB Văn hoá Thông tin, 2004).



In part, DRV and SRV political and intellectual elites have worked so hard to write an official past because the battle's outcome bequeathed an increasingly ambiguous and violent legacy. The cease-fire agreement reached in July 1954 at Geneva was predicated on a Cold War compromise akin to the partition of Korea and Germany, splitting Vietnam in two at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel. Though intended as temporary, the division between the two "administrative zones" of North and South hardened over time into a political boundary between states. The Republic of Vietnam's presence in the south confounded the DRV's claim to represent all of Vietnam, to be the sole legitimate heir to a unified Vietnam.<sup>18</sup> What followed was a bloody, decades-long civil war organized along the Cold War's ideological fault lines. Securing the DRV's Northwest Zone frontier, then, was only one of many militarized state-making projects in many frontiers.

The historical record from the Black River region sheds light not only on the contingent outcome of the DRV and Vietnam's ultimate spatial expanse but also on the condition of coloniality in Vietnam. Neither the onset of revolution in 1945 nor the conclusion of one war in 1954 marked a rupture, a clean break with the French colonial past. Rather, the foundations of post-colonial Vietnam—whatever its state form—lie squarely in its entanglement not just with French colonial sensibilities but also with inherited institutions, spatial borders, and social boundaries.<sup>19</sup> If this dissertation is about state-society relations broadly, then it was during the French war that terms like "state" and "society" or "nation" and "colonial" were socially constructed in spite of their uncertainty and analytical overlap. Just as national state inherited the externalized boundaries of colonial empire as well as Thái Federation personnel and institutions, so too did Vietnamese national society retain the colonially

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 4-5; Lockhart (1989), 263-264; Carlyle Thayer, *War by Other Means* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 1-7.

<sup>19</sup> Donald Moore, *Suffering for Territory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Pelley (2002), 4-5.

derived, internalized markers of ethnicity. Notwithstanding claims to the contrary—i.e., national unity and equality—Vietnamese society was and is predicated on an underlying hierarchy of social difference, one according to each group an “ethnic place,” not all of whom agree(d) with their relocation.

In spite of the telos nationalist histories accord it, the outcome of the supposed colonial-national confrontation pitched on the Mường Thanh plain was never foreordained. Indeed, to remember the result as “national victory” denies both the uncertainty of constructing a community isomorphic with territory and the ambiguity of defining a singularity in terms of its multiple differences. Rather, the dramatic result at Điện Biên Phủ in May 1954 was a contingent product of multiple, mutually-constitutive processes: securing territory through armed force; legitimating a centralizing claim to local resources; and institutionalizing a form of rule based on spatially and historically-specific social relations. What may have been an end to one set of hostilities at Điện Biên Phủ stimulated enduring conflicts over its meaning and contests over its outcome.

On 7 May 1955, a year after the defeat of French forces at Điện Biên Phủ, the Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone was formally established. It covered an enormous area of 55,000 square kilometers, fully 1/3<sup>rd</sup> the DRV’s territory, or 1/6<sup>th</sup> that of the contemporary Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Estimated at 320,000 residents, its population included 20 “ethnicities.”<sup>20</sup> If it appeared as though the promise of autonomy had been delivered, recall Trường Chinh’s distinction: self-rule here amounted to an administrative form, not full “political autonomy.” In a letter to the Thái-Mèo Zone’s “compatriots,” Hồ Chí Minh explained to “sibling ethnicities” that

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<sup>20</sup> “Tình hình khái quát về Khu tự trị dân tộc Thái Mèo ở Tây Bắc,” NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 22.

the Zone, “is one integral part of the great family of Vietnam.”<sup>21</sup> Despite its affective appeal, the President’s equation of family with nation belies an underlying hierarchy and permanence; for better or worse, once one is part of a family, one can never leave it. In spite of their overwhelming majority in the Zone itself, these “sibling ethnicities” figured as minorities in relation to the family-nation and its majority Kinh population. Although colonial boundaries endured as external demarcators of state space, they were now refigured as the boundaries of (one) national community.

Notwithstanding the novelty of these relations expressed as nation and state, relations of rule within the Zone reproduced older forms of inter-connected familial, communal, and spatial power. The Thái-Mèo Zone’s very name—an exemplar of spatial ethnologic—concealed and revealed manifold tensions of rule, relations of production, and community identity.<sup>22</sup> Xa Văn Minh and Lò Văn Hặc led the Thái-Mèo Zone’s Administrative Committee, pointing to the continued power of (loyal) elite Thái families.<sup>23</sup> Reproduced as 16 *châu* or counties, the *muang* spatial form re-emerged as an enduring internal unit of territorial administration and land management.<sup>24</sup> In keeping with a pattern established during a time of war, territorialized Administrative Committees regulated collection of the agricultural tax and muster of *dân công* labor. All of these claims to rule, resources, and territory remained subject to evolving, contested relations between rulers and subjects.

The Thái-Mèo Zone’s own spatial boundaries—from interstate borders with

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<sup>21</sup> Hồ Chí Minh, “Thư gửi đồng bào Khu tự trị Thái-Mèo,” *Bắc Hồ với Đồng bào các Dân tộc* (Hanoi: NXB Thông tấn, 2006), 18-20.

<sup>22</sup> Five years later, collectivization began to reorganize wet-rice land holding among Thái communities but they remained largely in control of choice bottomland. Moreover, the space was almost named, tellingly, the “Thái Autonomous Zone” before local protest by non-Thái (especially the Hmong [Mèo]) groups forced a change to the more representative, but still tellingly exclusionary, “Thái-Mèo Autonomous Zone.” Nguyễn Khánh, “Báo cáo tháng 11, 1954,” 2 Dec 1954, NAVC 3, phòng PTTg (1945-54), file no. 519, p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> “Hội đồng Nhân dân Khu tự trị Thái-Mèo đã bầu Ủy ban Hành Chính Khu,” *Nhân dân*, 13 May 1955.

<sup>24</sup> From 1955 to 1975, the 16 main *muang* were recognized as *châu* under the DRV’s two successive Autonomous Zones; after the abolishment of autonomy in 1975 in favor of the Socialist Republic’s standardized administration, these *muang* survive(d) as either districts (*huyện*) or communes (*xã*).

Laos on its west and south and with China to the north; to the heights overlooking the Red River on the east—cast its population within another, if not more historically familiar, set of hierarchical social relations.<sup>25</sup> Within this space, the Thái were recognized in DRV censuses and refigured themselves as an “ethnic majority.”<sup>26</sup> The Autonomous Zone consolidated a Thái hold on local government and reproduced a sense of Thái superiority in relation to allegedly inferior non-Thái social groups. Among its supporters, Cầm Trọng equates Kinh and Thái “majorities” in the nation and Northwest region, respectively, and assigns each a normative role to “help small ethnicities to quicken development.”<sup>27</sup> Among critics, a Hmong resident on the Lao border pointed out surrounding power relations as follows: “over there is Lao land, over here is the land of the Thái, down stream is the land of Kinh.”<sup>28</sup>

These spatial boundaries, at once an accident of mapping and a national reproduction of a colonial frontier, animated local politics among multiple, diverse social groups. Just as before, their relations unfolded contingently, in a process that produced results not always as intended. Far from being resolved, the question of ethnicity and its relation to territorialized power would express itself all over again. Between 1956-58 highland groups of disaffected Hmong, Dao, and Khu Mu communities, including local cadres working with them, led an armed royalist movement (called, *xung đón vua*) against what they perceived to be an “unjust” regime linking the historic *muang* to the downstream population, or “Thai and Kinh rule.” Even though the military and police defeated them, this counter-movement

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<sup>25</sup> At its founding, the Thái Mèo Autonomous Zone included all of Lai Châu and Sơn La provinces; the two districts (*huyện*) of Văn Chấn and Than Uyên in Yên Bái province; and Phong Thổ of Lào Cai.

<sup>26</sup> Recorded as agglomerated ethnicities—i.e., not accounting for local sub-differentiations—as follows, from largest to smallest: 176,400 Thái (56% total), 61,500 Hmông (19%), 19,600 Mường (6%), 18,900 Dao (6%), 9,600 Khơ Mú (3%)... Note that Kinh (3,100) and overseas Chinese (2,600) amounted to less than 1% each. “Tình hình...” NAVC 3, phòng UBHC KTTTB, file no. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Cầm Trọng, *Người Thái ở Tây Bắc Việt Nam* (Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1978), 566.

<sup>28</sup> “Bảo cáo tổng kết của khối miền núi,” 1958, NAVC 3, phòng Bộ Văn Hóa, file no. 927, 10.

threw into sharp relief the tensions embedded in wedding the DRV state project to *muang* forms of rule.<sup>29</sup>

In sum, I argued that attending to the archives critically and investigating historiographic omissions and commissions illuminates hidden histories in transforming a borderlands into a national frontier. I highlighted a particular moment of Vietnam's "Northwest," of making this space and its people Vietnamese—sometimes against their will. If the narrative of "national victory" at Điện Biên Phủ takes nation for granted, then I offered an alternative account that shows how making a nation was an exclusionary project, one that structured relations of community according to ethnic identifications, territorial imperatives, and political loyalties. This communal project, in turn, was central to forming state in contested territory, one that reformed relations of rule according to older patterns of spatial domination.

Legitimation was, and still remains, central to processes of making state and constructing nation. During the first Indochina war, a time of transition between forms of rule, legitimation work produced lasting effects—boundaries—in socially produced understandings of time (history), space (state), and community (ethnicity and nation). Official histories and commemorations continue such legitimation work by reproducing boundaries already apparent in 1953 Lai Châu and 1954 Party directives—periodizing a past according to the purported ruptures and discontinuities across the post/colonial divide. By contrast, while acknowledging the radically new terms of legitimation, my alternative telling of local history emphasizes continuities across 1954 in forms of spatialized and ethnicized local rule as well as persistent and socially meaningful differences specific to frontiers.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf., James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 317; Công an tỉnh Lai Châu, *Lịch sử Công an Nhân dân huyện Điện Biên (1952-1975)* (Hanoi: NXB Công an Nhân dân, 1994), 46-48; Vương Duy Quang, "Hiện tượng 'Xung vua' ở người Hmông," *Dân tộc học* 122 (2003): 28-37.

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